Nirvana

CONCEPT, IMAGERY, NARRATIVE

Steven Collins

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NIRVANA: CONCEPT, IMAGERY, NARRATIVE

The idea of nirvana (Pali: *nibbāna*) is alluring but elusive for non specialists and specialists alike. Offering his own interpretation of key texts, Steven Collins explains the idea in a new, accessible way as a concept, as an image (metaphor) and as an element in the process of narrating both linear and cyclical time. Exploring nirvana from literary and philosophical perspectives, he argues that it has a specific role: to provide 'the sense of an ending' in both the systematic and the narrative thought of the Pali *imaginaire*. Translations from a number of texts, including some dealing with past and future Buddhas, enable the reader to access source material directly. This book will be essential reading for students of Buddhism, but will also have much to teach anyone con cerned with Asia and its religions, or indeed anyone with an interest in the ideas of eternal life or timelessness.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521881982

First published in print format 2010

ISBN 13 978 0 511 67762 5 eBook (NetLibrary)

ISBN 13 978 0 521 88198 2 Hardback

ISBN 13 978 0 521 70834 0 Paperback

Contents

Introduction

WHAT IS THIS BOOK, AND WHO IS IT FOR?

This book is a rewritten version of Part I in my *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, published by Cambridge University Press in 1998 (paperback 2006). That book is long, complex, expensive, and not easy to use in teaching. In this book I aim to take the attempt at understanding nirvana offered in the earlier one, and present it in what I hope is a more accessible form; the main text is less crowded with details, all direct references to Pali texts have been removed, and most references to secondary works have been placed in the endnotes. All translations are my own. Although it is intended for that mythical beast, the General Reader, I have had primarily in mind university classes, at either the undergraduate or graduate level, in courses on Buddhism, comparative Religious Studies, History, Anthropology, or other. It is intended to provoke discussion rather than to present unalterable conclusions. In my experience with students at the University of Chicago to whom I have taught what is presented here, the overall methods, arguments, and conclusions are quite comprehensible, when explained pedagogically, whether or not individuals happen to be persuaded. Readers, and teachers using the book in classes, might consult the longer book for more detail, and for the overall argument about nirvana as a part of what I call there the discourse of felicity (explained briefly

below), and as part of what the subtitle of that book called *Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire*. But this is by no means necessary.

To suggest in what vein I would like this book to be read, or at least one of them, I would point to a body of work on the early Christian and medieval European worlds produced by Caroline Walker Bynum, collected in the volumes entitled *Fragmentation and Redemption* (1991), *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (1995), and *Metamorphosis and Identity*, (2001).[1] Bynum achieves a combination of two things, *inter alia*, which it would be presumptuous of me to claim also, although I can at least say that it is my aspiration: she deals with fundamental and timeless existential issues – the nature of embodiment, its relation to death and the possibility of life thereafter, the conceivability of eternal life, and much else besides – but in a manner which exemplifies the intellectual and academic virtues, again *inter alia*, of detailed linguistic (and other) analysis, meticulous care, and lucid exposition, in reading and discussing texts produced in an historical period quite different from our own. What is presented in this book, from the Pali imaginaire, was produced in roughly the same historical periods as the texts dealt with in Bynum's work, and it responds to many of the same timeless issues, but in an overall ideology different from the Christian in some very fundamental ways (though one could also argue, perhaps, that as a civilizational ideology in prescientific premodernity, it is the same, or similar, in some equally fundamental ways; that is one thing readers might discuss). What I have to say about what I will call *systematic* and *narrative* thought, and about the philosophical and cultural-historical importance of imagery and metaphor, and their capacity to be a connecting bridge between systematic and narrative thought, might also be thought through in relation to other traditions (and here Bynum's work will also be helpful). But that is an

example of the way in which the book might be used; the book is about Buddhism, it is not itself a comparative study.

It will, I hope, be helpful to summarize here some points from the General Introduction to the earlier book, in order to set the treatment of nirvana offered here in a larger context. I will do so in an abbreviated form, under a schematic set of headings.

THE DISCOURSE OF FELICITY: IMAGINING HAPPINESS

Max Weber usefully, if typically with Christian theological concepts transferred to sociology, spoke of what he – though not I – would call 'religions' as offering different kinds of *theodicy*.[2] In the Christian case this can be a purely logical issue: how can one reconcile the concept of a benevolent and all-powerful God with that of the real existence of evil and suffering? In Weber's use of the term it refers more broadly to all traditional ideological explanations and/or justifications of evil or suffering, and especially those produced by social injustice and social hierarchy (and there are no historical societies without hierarchy). But theodicies are not just matters of accounting for existing evils and injustices, on a social level; they must also elaborate visions of happiness and the resolution of injustice which are not subject to the existential threats posed, rhetorically and actually, collectively as well as individually, by aging and death. (They can also, of course, elaborate visions of the punishments which await those who do not follow their rules, an activity to which traditional Buddhists devoted themselves with every bit as much enthusiasm as traditional Christians.) In my terms, the word 'felicity' does double duty: first, it is simply a general term that denotes any and every form of happiness, well-being, flourishing, or whatever, produced by traditional ideologies (Chapter 3 discusses these words; Chapter 5 translates and discusses

texts concerned with what I call there ‘unprecedented well-being’); but second, it connotes the idea of a felicitous phrase, or felicities of expression – that is, successes, elegances, and other good qualities of discourse. The resolutions of evil and injustice offered in such ideologies are never actual, in the sense of being historically instantiated in a form of social life; they are always and only part of the internal content of texts, oral or written. They exist, historically, in an imaginaire.

THE PALI IMAGINAIRE

The General Introduction to *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* offers a history and analysis of the term ‘imaginaire’, and reasons to retain the French word. (Some writers use ‘imaginary’ as an English noun, which I find inelegant; ‘imagination’ is no good because it implies too strongly the non-existence of what is imagined.) The word ‘imaginaire’ can have various meanings, broad and narrow, and sometimes seems to be used to mean more or less the same thing as ‘culture’. My usage is in particular influenced by the work of the historian Jacques Le Goff, where it has the slightly more precise sense of a non-material, imaginative world constituted by texts, especially works of art and literature.[3] Such worlds are by definition not the same as the material world, but in so far as the material world is thought and experienced in part through them, they are not imaginary in the sense of being false, entirely made up. This usage has Durkheimian ancestry: Hubert and Mauss spoke of *la sphère imaginaire de la religion*, insisting that this sphere exists: ‘Religious ideas exist, because they are believed; they exist objectively, as social facts.’[4]

To be very brief, the Pali imaginaire means any and every text written (or translated into) Pali. I think it is a matter of empirical

fact that, as far as the grand issues of life, death, suffering, and nirvana are concerned, all texts in Pali show a remarkable consistency, and can be treated as a single whole. (There is one possible exception, a meditative state known as the Attainment of Cessation, or the Cessation of Perception/Ideation and Feeling, on which see Chapter 2.) On other issues – for example the precise working of the law(s) of *karma* (Pali: *kamma*) – I think that there is considerably less agreement, and an intellectual analysis and history of the idea(s) of *kamma* would require considerably more attention to differences and perhaps unintended paradoxes and contradictions in different texts. Jim Egge, writing helpfully about *kamma* in early Pali texts, has offered a useful refinement of the term 'Pali imaginaire': we might take it to mean, he suggests, precisely those things about which the whole body of Pali texts, or at least most of them, do in fact agree.[5] It is in this sense that I use the word in this book.

This book is only tangentially concerned with social history, but it is important to stress what is in fact entirely obvious: the creation, maintenance, and instantiation (in sermons, etc.) of the Pali imaginaire was necessarily the work of a group of people, in fact the specific social formation of the Monastic Order. (This Order, the *Saṅgha*, included monks and nuns until roughly the eleventh century in India and Sri Lanka; the Order of Nuns seems not to have existed elsewhere. But gender in Buddhism is too big an issue to take on here.) Here I will cite the quotation used in the Conclusion to my book *Selfless Persons*, from Clifford Geertz (see also the Conclusion to this book, apropos Thomas Mann). Writing of Islam in Morocco, Geertz said: 'What a given religion is – its specific content – is embodied in the images and metaphors its adherents use to characterize reality… But such a religion's career – its historical course – rests in turn upon the institutions which render those images and metaphors available to those who

thus employ them.' The relevant institution, the Buddhist *Saṅgha*, is an essential feature of Buddhist civilization, a word which I use here in a specific sense: all human groups have *culture*, since they practise and memorialize linguistic and other forms of representation and exchange; and they are all capable of asking the kinds of simple question – Where did the world come from? What happens after death? Why do good people often suffer and bad prosper? – to which transcendentalist ideologies give complexly articulated answers. *Culture* is a trait of human society, but a *civilization*, for my purposes, is something that creates and maintains an externalized, publicly recognized, and institutionalized form of *tradition* (at least one; sometimes, as in the case of ancient India, more than one) that answers such questions (and determines whether and how they are asked) in prestige languages, and whose status depends on the fact of its perceived *traditionality*. Such an institution has, crucially, its own personnel, where authority is transmitted from teacher to pupil rather than from biological parent to child (though these roles may coincide).

I must stress that this use of the term *civilization* is not evaluative, but – for a specific purpose only – descriptive: I do *not* mean that people who have culture but not civilization are uncivilized, barbarian, or whatnot. I just mean that they do not have a certain institution, or set of institutions, which embody *externalized tradition* and *traditionalism*. Again, all human life that spans more than a generation must have 'tradition(s)' in some sense; I want to point to a self-conscious, rhetorical orientation to the passage of time, and to authority, by those, almost universally men, who are accorded the social and institutional status of 'bearers of tradition'. *Tradition* means much more than just ideas and stories: there are behavioural and bodily regularities, forms of etiquette and ritual, dress codes, physical objects (oral and written texts; buildings; images; relics

and memorials as a category), and much else. But for present purposes it is enough to say that it was the institution of the Buddhist Monastic Order that created, preserved, and made available the ideas, images/metaphors, and narratives of the Pali imaginaire with which this book is concerned. The traditionalized textuality of Buddhist felicities is a crucial feature of them. They are part of the history of civilization(s) as well as part of the history of ideas.

EU-TOPIA AND *OU-TOPIA*

The founder of the modern European genre of utopian writing, Thomas More, referred to his *Utopia* in Latin as *Nusquama*, 'Nowhere', but it seems he also intended the title to be a Greek pun on *eu-topia*, 'Good-place', and *ou-topia*, 'No-place'.[6] Thus More has Anemolius ('Wind-bag'), Poet Laureate of Utopia, write, in the voice of the island itself:

> Me Utopie cleped [called] Antiquitie,
> Voyde of haunte [habitation] and herboroughe [harbour]
> . . .
> Wherfore not Utopie, but rather rightely
> My name is Eutopie: A place of felicitie.

More did not want his text to be seen definitely as lying on one or the other side of an ambiguity which continues to exist throughout the subsequent utopian tradition: eu-utopias as descriptions of real (actual or possible) ideal societies or as acknowledged fictions, ou-topias, which embody a critique of the writer's actual society. Sometimes authors are aware of the distinction between the two, and are clear about which they intend (or, as was More, clear about what they wanted not to be clear about). Sometimes they are not, or it is irrelevant to them.

I want to use the play on *ou-topia* and *eu-topia* in another way as well: a text by definition presents us with *a* world, which cannot, obviously, be *the* world in which it exists as a representational artefact, written-material or oral-aural. The world of an imaginaire inside any text is necessarily *ou-topia*, 'No-place', in relation to the real places of the material-historical world in which it exists as an artefact; but this imaginary No-place nonetheless exists, in a different sense, in the historical world, and one can write histories of it. Utopias are a species of literature, and all such forms of representations are always and everywhere both *eu-* and *ou-topias*. Pali texts refer to nirvana by a number of terms which can have spatial reference (see Chapter 2), and it is often referred to as (a) happy (place) (see Chapter 3). But none of these terms for place can be taken literally, since nirvana is an unconditioned Existent (a *dhamma*) outside space and time. Thus nirvana is not only *eu-topia*, Good-place, metaphorically, it is also *ou-topia*, No-place, twice over: first, by Buddhist definition, it exists outside the spatio-temporal locations of the conditioned world of rebirth, *saṃsāra*; second, in my argument, it is part of the discursive, textual world of soteriology embodied in the Pali imaginaire, which is, one might say, No-place in history.

NOTES ON THE WORDS 'THERAVĀDA' AND 'RELIGION'

It has become standard, both in the usage of Buddhists and in scholarly and other writing about them, to refer to the currently dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia as *Theravāda*. Recent research has shown that using the word in this sense is, in fact, a Western coinage, used for the first time in the 1830s and increasingly thereafter as an alternative to *Hīnayāna* (the Lesser Vehicle, so called by the *Mahāyāna*, the Great Vehicle, now

dominant in Tibet and East Asia), or the geographical 'Southern' Buddhism. The term became decisively popular as a self-description among Buddhists only after the World Fellowship of Buddhists passed a resolution in 1951 in favor of the term. In traditional Pali texts the word *theravāda*, which means literally 'the Doctrine of the Elders', meant two things: either (this is the most common sense) it referred to a specific lineage or lineages of monastic ordination; or, secondly and less commonly, it referred to various doctrines as depicted in Buddhist doxographical texts (that is, in histories of Buddhist doctrines and doctrinal debates). It is, therefore, somewhat imprecise as a social-historical term. I retain it here, for the sake of brevity in a book devoted to things other than social history, to mean a collection of social phenomena that have shared and still do share an orientation to the Pali imaginaire as a rhetorical and/or actual standard of orthodoxy (using this term in a loose, general sense). Starting in the first millennium AD, and extensively from the early second millennium, Pali texts were carried from places in South India and Sri Lanka throughout Southeast Asia, along with monastic ordination traditions from Sri Lanka. (Later such traditions would be re-imported from Southeast Asia into Sri Lanka, and latterly also in the twentieth century to India, among the Dalits in Maharashtra and elsewhere, and in what is called the Theravāda Revival in Nepal.) This process, in the past very often supported and at times instigated by kings eager to 'purify' the *Saṅgha* (that is, to offer support to a specific group or groups of monks), never entirely displaced other forms of Buddhism, notably what are rather vaguely called the Mahāyāna and Tantra. In fact, contemporary Southeast Asian Buddhism in practice contains much that is not in Pali texts: for example, we now know that certain popular figures – the monks called in Pali Upagutta and Mahakaccāyana, and the earth-goddess

usually known by her Thai name Mae Thoranī – who are either absent or rare in Pali texts but found in extant Sanskrit texts, came from Northeast India rather than South India or Sri Lanka. Despite the fact that in a social-historical sense 'Theravāda' is a recent usage it still seems to me to be useful as a short-hand term to gather together various social, textual, and historical phenomena in both the historical past and the contemporary practice and self-designation of the majority of Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, as also latterly for some in India and Nepal (and, indeed, the West). More precise and careful usage would be necessary for other purposes.

Such a distinction between a loose and general, but not useless, sense of a word and its lack of utility in contexts requiring more historical and interpretive accuracy is even more important in the case of the word 'religion'. Debates about the definition of the word, and whether it is a universal phenomenon in human life or not, have been and will no doubt remain endless. For myself, a loose, general conversational sense is acceptable: if someone were to ask me what is the majority religion in, say, Thailand or Burma, expecting a short, factual answer, it would seem best – and correct – simply to reply 'Buddhism' or perhaps 'Theravāda Buddhism', rather than churlishly to launch into a disquisition about the definition of the word, and the difficulty of applying it in many Buddhist (and other) contexts. In that general sense the words 'religion' and 'religious' are used, occasionally, in this book. But for reasons that will be evident to anyone who reads this book, it is a very much more difficult issue whether the kind(s) of Buddhist thought and practice discussed here are usefully so termed, and whether such a debate will achieve anything. The anthropologist Melford Spiro influentially defined 'religion' as 'an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated

super-human beings'. And it is true that apart from some modern, indeed modernist, Buddhists, most people who have called themselves, and whom we might call, Buddhists, have also practised religion in that sense, and have not found it necessary to distinguish between that and 'Buddhism'. The General Introduction to *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* discussed this issue, in relation to an extended concept of 'salvation', and otherwise. But it is irrelevant here. I nowhere use the words 'religion' or 'religious' in anything other than a loose, general sense. They do no analytical or interpretive work in this book.

CHAPTER 1

Systematic and narrative thought: eternity and closure in structure and story

It is, surely, no more than common sense to recognize that people react to problems, ideas, and events by telling stories about them, or by understanding them in terms of already known stories, as well as – and sometimes at the same time as – by thinking in abstract, conceptual terms about them; and that what counts as a good story is not the same as what counts as a good argument (or a good conceptual pattern), and vice versa. In the study of Hinduism, it would hardly be novel to insist on the fact that narratives are just as important as doctrinal or philosophical texts to our understanding of its intellectual as well its cultural and religious history. In the 1970s, for example, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty showed clearly and convincingly that if people had thought there was no 'Problem of Evil' in Hinduism, it was because they were looking in the wrong place: 'in philosophy rather than in mythology'.[1] In the study of Buddhism, however, this suggestion might still appear to be something new.[2] Although in the early days of the modern academic study of Buddhism many narrative texts were made known, since that time there has been little serious work on Buddhist stories beyond the vital task, still scarcely begun, of providing editions and translations of them, though there are some signs that this is changing.

The distinction and interrelation between systematic and narrative thought is central to the argument of this book, but I will not

rely on any special senses of the words. The psychologist Jerome Bruner, who has written extensively on this issue, offers an elegant vignette of the difference, drawing on an example provided by E. M. Forster: 'The term *then* functions differently in the logical proposition "if x, then y" and in the narrative *récit* "The king died, and then the queen died." One leads to a search for universal truth conditions, the other for likely particular connections between two events – mortal grief, suicide, foul play.'[3] Items of systematic thought are related to each other conceptually rather than sequentially, albeit that the embodiment of them in overt speech, thought, or writing will necessarily be in some order. The kinds of conceptual relation can be many, and I will not try to explore that field here. It is important to note that systematic thought is not necessarily logical, in the sense of being rationally defensible. It is often the case that concepts are put together in more or less impressionistic patterns, such as when binary oppositions are taken to be isomorphic: one notorious and unfortunately common example being man/woman, right/left, good/bad, knowledge/ignorance, light/dark, etc.; another being the analogy between the human body, the body of society, and the body of the cosmos.[4] Scientific advance often depends on the uncovering and unmasking of such prejudices. But the practices and the articulation of systematic thought do not depend, as does narrative, on a specific sequential ordering of its constituent parts; nor does it require voice(s), perspective(s), plot-structure(s) (e.g., initial situation → change (reversal) → resolution, etc.); nor does it require, as do all but a few recent Western texts, characters and their interaction.

Buddhist exegetical texts often make a distinction between teaching according to the *Sutta*-s (Discourses) and according to the *Abhidhamma* (Further Teaching), which can to some extent and in some cases be analogous to the distinction between narrative and

systematic thought. But logical (and other) argumentation is also a characteristic of the way the Buddha's teaching is presented in the *Sutta*-s. The Pali 'Further Teaching', often characterized as 'Buddhist Philosophy', contains both a text entirely devoted to refutation of others' arguments, the 'Points of Controversy' (*Kathāvatthu*), and a text called 'Character-Types' (*Puggala-paññatti*); the latter are necessary, for example, in choosing which meditation-subjects are suitable for which individuals. But it is indeed mostly organized in terms of a particular, systematic textual-intellectual strategy, one to which scarcely any interpretive attention has been given: lists (*māṭikā*), interlocking and overlapping: the Three Characteristics, Four Noble Truths, Five Aggregates, Six (Internal or External) Sense-Bases, Seven Factors of Awakening, Eight-fold Path, and many others. Such lists facilitate both memorization and exposition, especially in an oral culture, but they do more than just that. (And note that lists are a very common feature of the earliest extant written documents also.) They form the fundamental matrix of Buddhist systematic thought, as Rupert Gethin suggests, in something like the basic sense of the term *māṭikā*, 'mother': 'A *māṭikā* is not so much a condensed summary, as the seed from which something grows. A *māṭikā* is something creative – something out of which something further evolves. It is, as it were, pregnant with the Dhamma and able to generate it in its fullness.'[5] These lists are interrelated in three principal ways: one may subsume another, one may be substituted for another, one may suggest another by association. In an oral sermon or a written text, one can begin anywhere; Gethin provides an example by beginning with the Four Noble Truths, and expanding from there to a number of other lists. Then he says:

> It is important to note that this exercise was concluded at a more or less arbitrary point. In principle the process of drawing out lists might have been

> continued indefinitely; certain avenues were not fully explored, while at several points we arrive back where we started, with the four noble truths, allowing us to begin the whole process again … We may begin with one simple list, but the structure of early Buddhist thought and literature dictates that we end up with an intricate pattern of lists within lists, which sometimes turns back on itself and repeats itself, the parts subsuming the whole.[6]

In Buddhist systematic thought, the beginning and end points of an exposition can differ, as can the ordering of the intervening items, without any basic change in the meaning of what is said in and through the lists thus ordered. In narrative, by contrast, differences in any of these three things must have an effect on meaning; and significant differences may lead one to say that the story has a different meaning, or even that one is dealing with a different story. (I avoid the difficult issue of what counts as a different story, rather than a different version of one story.) Narrative is necessarily sequential, in two senses beyond the fact that any discourse takes time: the specific sequencing of its constituent parts makes the story what it is, and the passage of time is intrinsic to the way it produces meaning as a story. This, I think, is part of what Hayden White means when he says that 'narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing', and what Paul Ricoeur is pointing to when he says that 'the structure of temporality' is an ultimate referent of all narratives, whether historical or fictional.[7] I try in Chapters 4 and 5 to show at some length how time can be a proximate as well as an ultimate referent, in what I call the Buddhist textualization of time.

Systematic and narrative thought are forms of Buddhist soteriology, related but different modalities in its discursive rationalization of the polytheism of everyday life. This book is concerned with

nirvana. The point could be made with regard to karma: this can indeed be treated as a 'belief', as an idea that performs various explanatory and other functions in a systematic manner; but it can also be seen as a principle of narrative (dis)connection, providing a vehicle for the narrative voicing and perspective intrinsic to that form of textuality (this is often the 'omniscient' and impersonal narrative voice, often that of some individual, such as the Buddha). It provides a repertory of means by which identities can be established, connected, and disconnected, and by which events in the plot are organized in some form (there are many).

My argument is that nirvana provides closure in both forms of mental/textual process.

(i) In systematic thought, it makes Buddhist cosmology (and thereby, its psychology) a *universe*, in the etymological sense of the term, a single whole. In arguing this I draw an analogy between cosmology as a discursive trope in premodern ideology, and social structure as a discursive trope in modern ethnography.

(ii) In narrative thought, nirvana provides the sense of an ending, both in the Buddhist master-text and in countless actual texts and ritual sequences.

CLOSURE IN SYSTEMATIC THOUGHT

Systematic thought unifies a field, organizes it into a system, by means of a matrix of categories. In the Buddhist case this matrix centres around the concepts of *saṃkhārā*, conditioned things or events, or *saṃkhata*, (the) conditioned; these are cognitive constructs that include, as their logical contradictory, the idea of *asaṃkhata*, the unconditioned, or nirvana. This complementary

opposition is what lies behind the Buddhist claim that life is suffering. But the implicit positing of nirvana as final salvation in this way is not merely an issue of logic; it is essential to the Buddhist project of theodicy. Any and every form of local, here-and-now distress, from which salvation (in its extended sense) is sought, is understood by means of – though usually not dealt with merely by reference to – the ultimate explanatory scheme of karma, action and its effects, which operates automatically and impersonally in the universe of conditioning, *saṃsāra*, both within a particular lifetime and across a series of rebirths. In this scheme there is no injustice, no accident: all distress is in some sense merited, as a form of retribution for previous misdeeds. But the universe of conditioning and karma would itself be a pointless 'mass of suffering', as Buddhist texts put it, were it not for the possibility of Release. Nirvana makes of the universe of conditioning a *system*, a conceptual structure with an outside through which the inside is ordered, and a hierarchy of values within it made possible. It is important at this point to dislodge the pervasive Western assumption that discursive accounts of the universe must give it a purpose, a reason for existence; this is an ethnocentric supposition, derived from Christian narrative rationalization. The suggestion I am making here is quite different: it is that Buddhist soteriological thought requires both sides of the opposition 'conditioned/unconditioned' for its unification of everyday life to be conceptually systematic, to constitute a single *universe*. The argument here is not that the universe exists *in order that* nirvana should be possible – there simply is no such teleological explanation for existence in Buddhism; it is, rather, that the representation of the universe of karma, time, and conditioning as a discursively constructed unity is dependent on the closure effected by its complementary opposite, nirvana.

In 'The Rhetoric of Ethnographic Holism', Robert Thornton contrasts the necessarily fragmented, partial, always unfinished nature of daily social life and ethnographic experience to the classifications and rhetorical tropes of the ethnographic text as a species of representation. Primary among these tropes is that of the social whole: 'ethnography's essential fiction'.

> Ethnography relies on the fact that it is an object, a text, radically removed from the initial experiences and perceptions on which it is based. The representation of reality, whether on note cards or in chapter headings, is confused with reality and manipulated as objects [*sic*] in ways that culture or society cannot be. The text itself is the object of knowledge …
>
> A text, to be convincing as a description of reality, must convey some sense of closure. For the ethnography, this closure is achieved by the textual play of object reference and self reference that the classificatory imagination permits …
>
> The ethnographic monograph presents us with an analogy between the text itself and the 'society' or 'culture' that it describes. The sense of a discrete social or cultural entity that is conveyed by an ethnography is founded on the sense of closure or completeness of both the physical text and its rhetorical format.[8]

My point is simple: just as it is common to speak of indigenous psychologies or ethno-psychologies, and ethno-history, so one may speak of traditional visions of society and cosmology as indigenous ethnographies (accurately but inelegantly, 'ethno-ethnographies'). What external observers or internal participants call 'society' in any given time and place is an interpretation of events and processes within an arena rather than the arena itself. No-one, inside or outside, can gain discursive access to it without such interpretations, emic or etic. Indigenous interpretations are, as Burghart puts it, 'objectifications of an arena', which 'provide social scientists (who are also objectifiers of the arena) with a variety of ready-made schemes of the social universe'.[9] If, as Thornton suggests, in modern academic

ethnographies social structure is a rhetorical form produced by the facts of discursive closure and of the completeness of a text *qua* artefact, so analogously the play of object-reference and self-reference in the order-enunciating discourse of indigenous (ethno-) ethnographies permits society and the cosmos, temporally and spatially extended and complex beyond any individual's or group's possible experience, to be imagined therein as wholes, articulated as two parts of a single hierarchy. In premodern circumstances –where protocols of scientific empiricism and practices of intervention in the material-historical world weighed so much less heavily on the order of discourse and the practices of representing that world than they do now – it was possible to tolerate a kind of radical divergence between pragmatic-empirical knowledge of geography – which certainly existed – and ideological cosmo-geography. Accordingly, the rhetorical tropes of ideology could all the more readily produce the sense of a structured whole 'really out there'.

CLOSURE IN NARRATIVE THOUGHT

The Pali imaginaire tells no cosmogonic stories, and there are no supernatural beings outside space and time to bestride the stage of its everyday-polytheism-organizing enunciation of order, but narrative thinking is nonetheless pervasive in and fundamental to it. In systematic thought, the idea of nirvana as the unconditioned, timeless complement of conditioned life-in-time takes its place in a logically structured matrix of concepts produced by what Thornton calls 'the classificatory imagination'. In narrative thought, whose production of meaning requires the sequential ordering of its constituents, one must ask: how can timelessness, eternity, be narrated? The simple answer is that it cannot, in so far as all narrative has temporality as an ultimate referent. But

timelessness can play the syntactic role of the full stop (period), bringing closure to a temporally extended narrative sequence. Nirvana makes possible for the imagination what texts can do but life cannot: to come to a satisfactory end rather than merely stop.

I want to make this claim about the role of timeless nirvana in time-structured and time-referential narrative not only as a contingent, empirical fact about Pali texts, but as a general point about the notion of 'eternity'. This can mean either, or both, of two things: timelessness and/or endlessness. I suggest, as a form of argument independent of the interpretive use made of it in this book, that both kinds of eternity are, despite appearances, unimaginable, in the sense that they are un-narratable. The classificatory imagination can certainly entertain eternity, timeless and/or endless, as a conceptual category; and images – in the Buddhist case, famously, the blowing out of a flame – can be effective mental vehicles for the incorporation of eternity into the temporal process. But no story of eternity can be told: eternity is where stories end.

Bernard Williams, in 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality', discusses a story – made into an opera by Janáček – in which a sixteenth-century woman, Elina Makropulos, is given an elixir of life; at the time of taking it she is forty-two, and she remains at that age for 300 years. 'Her unending life', says Williams,

> has come to a state of boredom, indifference and coldness. Everything is joyless: 'in the end it is the same', she says, 'singing and silence'. She refuses to take the elixir again; she dies; and the formula is deliberately destroyed by a young woman amid the protests of some older men …
>
> Her trouble was, it seems, boredom: a boredom connected with the fact that everything that could happen and make sense to one particular human being of 42 had already happened to her. Or rather, all the sorts of things that could make sense to a woman of a certain character; for [she] has a certain character, and indeed, except for her accumulating memories of earlier times … seems always to have been much the same sort of person.[10]

He formulates two requirements for any future life to be considered a form of immortality for *me* – that is, for this conscious embodied person here and now. It must be the case that

(i) 'it should clearly be *me* who lives forever' (at this stage of the argument this is not contradicted by the Buddhist view that there is no permanent self: 'me' equals 'this speciously present consciousness, spatio-temporally located here'); and that
(ii) 'the state in which I survive should be one which, to me looking forward, will be adequately related, in the life it presents, to those aims I now have in wanting to survive at all'.

Makropulos's life satisfies the first condition, but not the second; for it is, Williams claims, a necessary consequence of being a self-conscious and self-reflective personality that such an extraordinary extension and repetition of experience should result in a state of frozen, inhuman detachment.

It seems to me that, apart from the fact that 300 years might be thought rather too short a time to produce these dismaying effects, it is unfortunate that Williams chose to express his point in the psychological vocabulary of boredom; for that immediately allows, for example, the retort of another philosopher that he cannot 'at present' imagine tiring of life, and to ask of Williams, 'Can it be that he is more easily bored than I?' (It may seem a little frivolous to speak of boredom in heaven, but this is certainly an issue which has concerned Christians explicitly in the last two centuries: a 1975 article in the *U.S. Catholic* asked: 'Heaven: Will it be Boring?', and answered no, for in heaven souls are called 'not to eternal rest but to eternal activity – eternal social concern'.) But the problem here is best seen, I think, not as a matter of whether certain emotions or reactions to experience are inevitable, but of the possibilities of, and constraints on, narrative imagination: if one – anyone – tries to imagine his or her existence

stretching forward not merely 300 years, but 300,000 or 300 million or 300 billion, or whatever (in immortality, 'world without end', these lengths of time are but a beginning), it will soon, I contend, become impossible to retain any sense of a recognizable structure of human emotions, reactions, intentions, aspirations, interrelations, etc. All these things take place in time, necessarily, but in a limited, narratively coherent length of time. It is possible to imagine the infinite extension of experience, at least in the sense of an infinite repetition of certain kinds of physical or psychological suffering and gratification. But such infinite repetition would take place in something one can only call a site for consciousness, not a person. Persons are developmental; they are born, grow up, grow old, and die; they are stories – extended tales or short episodes – with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The sheer quantity of experienced material in eternity, along with its *a priori* endlessness, would mean that one might be able to record a chronological sequence of experience, but that the coherence of narrative necessary for personhood would become impossible.

This point is made forcibly and well by Zygmunt Bauman, reflecting on Jorge Luis Borges's short story 'The Immortal'. Borges emulates Jonathan Swift by attempting, or at least seeming to attempt, a depiction of immortality as endlessness. In Part III of *Gulliver's Travels* Swift's Struldbruggians never die, but Gulliver's 'keen Appetite for Perpetuity of Life' soon abates, since he comes to realize that they simply continue to grow older, and so become hateful to themselves and everyone else. Swift's detailed account of their lives, however, goes only as far as ninety, by which time they have already reached a stage where senile dementia has clearly set in. Thereafter he mentions that 'they are [not] able after Two Hundred Years to hold any Conversation', and adds: 'I afterward saw five or six of different Ages, the youngest not above Two Hundred Years

old.' This is clearly *not* an attempt to narrate endless life, but rather to suggest that anything worth calling human life cannot extend much beyond ninety. In Borges's story, the Immortals appear at first to the narrative voice to be troglodytes, for they are 'naked, gray-skinned, scraggly-bearded men' who seem not to talk, and who eat snakes. The appearance is misleading, however, for one of the troglodytes turns out to be Homer, who at the time when the story is set can remember little of the *Odyssey*, since 'it must be a thousand and one hundred years since I invented it'. (Again, a lifetime of 1,100 years would still be but a drop in the ocean of endlessness.) For the Immortals nothing is precious, nothing worth striving for, since 'if we postulate an infinite period of time, with infinite circumstances and changes, the impossible thing is not to compose the *Odyssey*, at least once'. Bauman asks Elias Canetti's rhetorical question: 'How many people will find it worth while living once they don't have to die?', and suggests that it is the fact that Borges's Immortals had a mortal past that produces their

> conception that if circumstances are infinite, deeds and thoughts are *worth less*, [a conception which] is itself a product of finite existence, of life injected with the known inevitability of death. It could make sense only to those who remembered that their circumstances were once finite and thereby *precious*: to those capable to grasp [*sic*] the significance of values, once born of finitude.
>
> The genuine immortals would not be aware that they are *not mortal*. For this very reason they elude our imagination … Their experience (that is, *if* there was an experience) could not be narrated in our language, which was itself begotten of the premonition of finitude and accommodated itself to the service of finite experience.[11]

It seems clear – to me at least – that Christian (or any other) conceptions of eternity as a final goal work only as the climax of a story, or as the centrepiece of a painting or tableau of salvation. In

the European Middle Ages, for example, it is common to find a static picture of heaven, which resembles very closely a picture of a church service in a great cathedral, with the real God in place of the altar as focus of devotion. Dante's vision of heaven is not so much a description of *life* there, as a record of his travels around the celestial realm, with occasional depictions of scenes, as on a stage, from different parts of it; one might say, a landscape that one can visualize but not imagine dwelling in. Similarly, in the study of utopias it is often said that such visions have great difficulty in providing their perfect society with a history; nothing can get better, no misfortunes can occur; it is hard to imagine much *happening* at all. Modern activist descriptions of heaven demonstrate quite clearly that it is impossible to narrate any convincing account of an endless human happiness. An activist heaven can involve, for example, family reunions, absorbing and enjoyable work, educational and sporting activities: in short, various images of human fulfilment transposed to the future life. To take but one example from many given by MacDannell and Lang: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, daughter of a Massachussetts seminary professor, wrote bestselling novels in the nineteenth century describing heaven. In one of them, we read, many souls 'seemed to be students, thronging what we should now call below colleges, seminaries, or schools of art, or music, or sciences':[12] that is, one might say, life at a New England college on a fine day in spring. One only has to ask, of course, what this 'life' would be like when prolonged for billions and billions of years, with no prospect of change (or graduation?), to see the problem with this kind of imagined world. The Reverend Sydney Smith in the nineteenth century is alleged to have described heaven as 'like eating foie gras to the sound of trumpets'. Personally I'd prefer garlic bread and John Coltrane; but it is surely obvious that no vision of this kind, taken

literally – versions of what one might call the 'Big Rock Candy Mountain' view of heaven – can make any imaginative sense when the form of pleasure in question is extended and repeated endlessly (the Alka Seltzer approach to immortality.)

Perhaps the problem here is the conception of eternity as infinite extension: might not a better notion of eternal life be of a timeless bliss, a Beatific Vision without temporal duration? But this fails to satisfy either of Williams's requirements. Even if we can make sense of the idea of a timeless consciousness, such a prospect clearly will not be *me*. No action, no thought, no intentions, aspirations, or memories can be possible without time. With no time to remember anything, leave alone to have new experiences, it would be impossible to have any sense of personality, any sense of 'who one is'. For this reason such a prospect, although certainly a possible aim for me now, cannot be said to be a form of *survival* – rather, for me now it is indistinguishable from death. In teaching Buddhism the question 'What is nirvana?' always – and rightly – comes up in the earliest sessions. For the reasons given here, I have taken to replying that I used to worry that I couldn't understand nirvana until I realized that I didn't understand the Christian (or Islamic) heaven or the Hindu idea of absorption into the World Spirit (*brahman*), or indeed any other such conception of *eternal* salvation either; it is a mistake, I think, to assume that the presence in doctrine of a self or soul, whether individual, as in Christianity, or collective, as in (much of) Hinduism, makes eternity any more comprehensible.

In seeking to establish this interpretive position from which to elucidate Buddhist ideas, I do not mean to denigrate religious aspirations to eternity. It is certainly coherent to hope *that* a resolution of suffering and a fulfilment of human aspiration are possible, without knowing anything about *what* that is or might be. I would ask any reader who may think it possible to know *what*

eternal happiness might be like: if it is timeless, how are *you* present, and if it is endless, what possible well-being could retain its attraction, indeed its meaning *as* well-being, when infinitely repeated? Among modern Christian theologians, agnosticism about the nature of heaven, or even straightforward denials of personal immortality, are now common. A good example of the former is provided by the Reverend F. H. Brabant, who returned in 1936 from 'the silence of the veldt ... on the Mission Field (in Zululand)' to deliver the Bampton Lectures from the pulpit of St Mary's Church in Oxford, on 'Time and Eternity in Christian Thought'. He first surveyed Greek, Christian, and Modern ideas, and then considered, in Chapter 8, 'The Problem at the End of This World Order – Eternal Life'; in particular, he addressed the issue of how the life of perfection in heaven could be related to activity, change, and time. His own preference was for 'the contemplative life', but he insisted that 'God's eternity is the fullest activity of enjoyment and it would be very crude to believe that, whenever we are not "doing things", we are passive in the sense of asleep'. Finally, he dismissed the subject with the following remark, appropriate perhaps for a sermon but a clear admission of defeat from an analytical point of view: 'If scope is wanted for parading our philosophical theories, some other field should be found than the life of Heaven.'[13]

If the argument given here is correct, one can say that of the two possible forms of eternal life, timelessness and infinite extension, the one would be equivalent to death and the other, eventually, because of infinite repetition, equivalent to hell. One way out of the dilemma, perhaps, would be to suggest that an infinite extension of life need not involve endless repetition and the awareness of it, for we might imagine an infinite series of lives, without the constraint of having a single personality or character to tie the experiences

together, and remember them. There are problems here, of course, with Williams's first requirement, that such a series of personalities should be *me*. But even if we assume this problem to be solved, as Buddhism does in a particular way, we are confronted with a striking fact. It turns out – thanks to the history of early Indian ideas of the afterlife – that this is the problem, not the solution. As Williams says: 'It is singular that those systems of belief that get closest to actually accepting recurrence of this sort seem, almost without exception, to look forward to the point when one will be released from it. Such systems seem less interested in continuing one's life than in earning one the right to a superior sort of death.'

It is not clear exactly which systems of belief he has in mind here: among others, surely, Buddhism and its conception of nirvana as release from rebirth. Reverting to some language used above, one might say that the Buddhist view of rebirth involves precisely the idea of a site for consciousness – i.e., an individual series of karmic causal relations – which is not in itself a person, but a continuum in which narratively coherent persons – short stories – appear sequentially, each one beginning and ending in a limited stretch of time. (Indeed, all Buddhist stories, especially those called 'Birth Stories' (*Jātaka*), tales of Gotama Buddha's previous lives, are just this.) The equation of nirvana with extinction or death, as in Williams's remarks, is common: in Freud, for example, the wish or instinct for death was also expressed as 'the Nirvana principle'.[14] But as an attempt at humanistic, empathetic understanding, rather than as a conceptual point, the suggestion that untold millions of our fellow human beings can have simply and explicitly aspired to 'a superior sort of death' as their highest conceivable goal seems rather unsatisfactory. Although my account will presuppose the truth of the argument sketched out here, I want to use that argument as the basis for an interpretation of the role of nirvana in Buddhism that

does not reduce the concept to an overt or covert death-wish. It may still be 'a superior sort of death', but not in the sense Williams means; it is an imagined cessation that conquers, discursively at least, the suffering and death intrinsic to all life.

I assume in what follows that any notion of eternal bliss, whether timeless or endless, Buddhist or Christian, or of any other kind, cannot coherently become the object of narratively elaborated imagination. The problem is not one of logic; one can juxtapose in one's mind without logical contradiction the concept of eternity and any other concept (apart, of course, from that of non-eternity). One can also imagine any number of static paintings or tableaux of salvation. But no coherent narrative of persons (as opposed to a list-like record of experiences, or episodic short stories) in eternity is possible; and without such a narrative there can be no sense of living a life.

CHAPTER 2

Nirvana as a concept

ACTION, CONDITIONING, TIME, AND TIMELESSNESS

The thought of Buddhism is continuous with that of the pre-Buddhist Brahmanical tradition, where ideas of time and life after death had evolved slowly but decisively. The earliest Vedic religion had little that can be called soteriology; the extant texts stress the aspiration for good things in this life: sons, cattle, victory in war, and so on. The word normally translated 'immortality', *amṛtam*, in its earliest occurrences meant more simply non-dying, in the sense of continuing life; thus it was no paradox for Vedic hymns to aspire to the possession of *amṛtam* as a 'full life' lasting a hundred years. There was a notion of timelessness, an 'unborn', which was, to use the Vedic image as adapted by T. S. Eliot, 'the still point of the turning world' of time;[1] it was also its timeless structure, the whole rather than its temporal constituents taken sequentially. This whole was the recurring year, whose constituent parts (days and nights, months, seasons) formed the spokes of the invariable but incessant wheel of time, whose movement was both symbolized and constituted by the daily and yearly cycle of the sun.

The hope for life after death first appeared in imprecise and collective notions of going to the worlds of the Fathers (of the Ancestors) and/or the world of the Gods or Heaven. As the sacrificial ritual of the Brahmin priests was seen to be increasingly

central to cosmogony and to the continual regeneration of time, there was increasing emphasis on the hope that for individuals *amṛtam*, non-dying, might be extended after death; but this was not a notion of immortality in the usual sense of that word in English. Just as life-in-time before death had been subject to *punarmṛtyu*, repeated dying, in the sequence of days and nights, in the repeated death and rebirth of the sun, and had needed constant renewal through sacrifice to keep going, so too life after death came to be seen as subject to the same limitations of temporality. If in this life non-dying was the result of sacrificial action, then life after death also would need constant renewal, constant avoidance of repeated dying through sacrificial action – *karma* in the earliest sense of that word. A crucial implication of this was brought out finally in the *Upaniṣad*-s: just as the prolongation of life (= non-dying) in this life ended in a final death, so too, although life might be continued after death, this next life would end in a second death. Thus, on a conceptual level, wanting more life was equivalent to wanting further subjection to death. This may make slightly more comprehensible, although it cannot explain, that radical cultural change whose wider socio-cultural roots and rationale we still do not understand: that is, the fact that eventually, in the *Upaniṣad*-s and thereafter, action (*karma*) and its results came to be seen not as producing the desired object of religious aspiration, but rather as an inevitable but undesirable fact. The process of rebirth or reincarnation fuelled (to use the Buddhist image) by action and its results was now thought to happen necessarily and automatically, unless an individual sought to escape from it.

By the time of the *Upaniṣad*-s, the evolution of ideas about *karma*, *saṃsāra*, and liberation from it had been finally, albeit again gradually, completed. In this soteriology the goal of liberation was achieved through realizing – both understanding and

making real as a fact of experience – that the essence of the individual, the microcosmic self, *ātman*, was identical with the essence of the universe, the macrocosmic self, *brahman*. There was a clear distinction between time and timelessness. The *Maitrī Upaniṣad* (6, 15, 17), for example, says that food is the source of the world, time the source of food, and the sun the source of time; it then distinguishes

> two forms of *brahman*, time and the timeless. That which is prior to the sun is the timeless and partless (*akala*, *akala*); but that which begins with the sun is time, and has parts. The form of that which has parts is the year; from the year indeed are born these creatures … In the beginning this universe was *brahman*, the endless one endless to the east, to the south, west, north, above and below, endless everywhere; for in it east and the other directions are not to be found, nor across, nor below nor above. This supreme self (*paramatman*), whose essence is space, is incomprehensible, immeasurable, unborn, beyond reasoning, inconceivable … He who knows this attains the unity of the One.

This general scheme remained basic to later Hinduism, to Jainism, and to Buddhism. Eternal salvation, to use the Christian term, is not conceived of as world without end; we have already got that, called *saṃsāra*, the world of rebirth and redeath: that is the problem, not the solution. The ultimate aim is the timeless state of *mokṣa*, or as the Buddhists seem to have been the first to call it, nirvana.

As Lilian Silburn put it: 'It is around the verb *saṃ-s-kṛ* – the activity which shapes, arranges together, consolidates, and brings to completion – that the reflections of the Buddha are concentrated, as were concentrated those of the *Brāhmaṇas* before him, for it is there that one finds the key to these two systems which posit a certain kind of action as the source of reality.'[2] In Buddhism, as tentatively in the *Upaniṣad*-s and throughout later Hinduism, the idea of *karma* is generalized from the particular and restricted sphere of sacrificial performance to morally relevant action in general. But the

fundamental idea is the same. Karma is from the root *kṛ*, to do; and forms of *saṃ-s-kṛ* provide the standard terminology in which continued life in the sequence of rebirths is described, as a process of conditioning brought about by action and its inevitable results. The term *saṃkhāra* is central to Buddhist thought, but is difficult to translate: conditioned factor/thing/event, (mental) formation, inherited force, construction. It can refer not only to an active, causal, and volitional force, but also to the results of such action, to that which is brought into being by conditioning. The corresponding past passive participle, *saṃkhata*, (something) made or brought into being, (a) conditioned (phenomenon), can be predicated of everything that exists, apart from nirvana, which is the only unconditioned element (*asaṃkhata-dhātu*).

Conditioning Factors are the fourth in a list of five categories, Aggregates (*khandhā*), or constituents of personhood; the others are Body, Feelings, Perceptions/Ideas, and Consciousness. These Five Aggregates describe exhaustively the interrelated psycho-physical events conventionally referred to as a person. Conditioning Factors are also the second of the twelve-fold Dependent Origination list. The general fact of conditioning is called *idapaccayatā*, the fact of (everything's) having specific conditions. This was elaborated into the twelve-fold list, the arising (*samudaya*) of which is the origin of suffering, and the cessation (*nirodha*) of which is its ending, nirvana. The following gives one standard exegesis of the twelve-fold list, in terms of three consecutive lifetimes:

1. Past life

 With ignorance as condition there arise Conditioning Factors
 With Conditioning Factors as condition there arises consciousness
 (at the moment of conception)

2. Present life

   With consciousness as condition there arise mind-and-body
   … mind-and-body … the six senses
   … the six senses … sense-contact
   … sense-contact … feeling
   … feeling … craving
   … craving … grasping
   … grasping … becoming
   … becoming … birth (thus:)

3. Future life

   With birth as condition there arise old age and death, distress, grief, suffering, sorrow and unrest. Such is the arising of this whole mass of unsatisfactoriness.

Conditioning Factors and the Unconditioned together form the wider category of Existents (*dhammā*, both Conditioned and Unconditioned). These categories can be elucidated by the Three Characteristics: suffering, or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), impermanence (*aniccatā*), and not-self (*anattā*):

(i) all Conditioning Factors (everything that is conditioned, *saṃkhata*) are suffering,
(ii) all Conditioning Factors are impermanent,
(iii) all Existents are not-self.

The translation 'suffering' for *dukkha* is in non-philosophical contexts often best, but it is misleading conceptually. It is patently false, for Buddhists as for everyone except the pathologically depressed, that everything in life is suffering; Buddhist texts, accordingly, distinguish between three kinds of *dukkha*: ordinary suffering, suffering that arises through change, and the suffering that is inherent in conditioned existence. Only the first, and to a limited

extent the second, can sensibly be called suffering in a simple English sense. This is why 'unsatisfactoriness' is sometimes preferable as a translation: to predicate *dukkha* of conditioned things is not to describe a feeling-tone in the experience of them, but to prescribe an evaluation, one that makes sense only in relation to the opposite evaluation of nirvana, the Unconditioned, as satisfactory. The second of the Three Characteristics, impermanence, refers to the inevitable cessation of all Conditioning Factors. Whatever is conditioned is characterized by arising, decay, and change in what is present, whereas the Unconditioned is not so characterized. Nirvana is permanent, constant, eternal, not subject to change. It is in this sense that nirvana is endless: not that it is characterized by unending temporal duration, but that, being timeless, there are no ends in it.

In Buddhism, as in the *Upaniṣad*-s, time is divided into past, present, and future, and the ultimate goal is described as outside or beyond the three times. The three times are interpreted in two ways:

(i) as referring to past, present, and future lives; this interpretation is 'according to the method of the *Sutta*-s' (sermons and narrative texts dealing with 'conventional truth');

(ii) as referring to the three subdivisions of the infinitesimally brief moment in which any conditioned Existent exists (arising, presence, and cessation – or simply before, during, and after); this interpretation is 'according to the method of the *Abhidhamma*' (texts of 'ultimate truth', that is, which contain analysis into Existents).

This distinction is made in the commentaries to two canonical texts which use the categories of past, present, and future; they go on to say that 'this division into past (present and future), is (a division) of Existents, not of time; in relation to Existents which are divided

into past, etc., time does not exist in ultimate truth, and therefore here "past", etc., are only spoken of by conventional usage'. Elsewhere it is said that 'time is defined in dependence on' various phenomena, such as the sequence of Existents, planting seeds and their sprouting, movements of the sun and moon, etc.; but 'time itself, because it has no individual nature, is to be understood to be merely a concept'. The divisions of time into three periods, and the use of finite verbs such as 'was', 'is', and 'will be', are elsewhere called (merely) 'forms of expression, language, and conceptualization'.

The sequence of the three times is thus secondary, generated by and in the process by which conditioned Existents, which are also Conditioning Factors, give rise to more of the same: from this it follows obviously that if that process is arrested, time will not exist. The Bactrian-Greek king Milinda, allegedly in the second century BC, asks the monk Nāgasena, as St Augustine was to ask himself in North Africa some centuries later, 'What is time?' Nāgasena's answer refers to the process of Conditioning Factors and Existents, and he states that time does not exist for those who attain nirvana and are no longer reborn. All Existents can be past, present, and future, with the exception of nirvana, which cannot be characterized in this way; nirvana is not *tekālika*, belonging to the three times, but *kāla-vimutta*, free from time. A commentary explains that when a text refers to the Buddha's great wisdom as encompassing all aspects of all Existents, past, present, and future, 'nirvana, which is free from time, is also to be understood' (as known by him). Elsewhere the Buddha is said to be omniscient, in the sense that he has seen and understood 'everything conditioned in the three times and the Unconditioned, free from time'.

The following two texts use plays on words to express various aspects of the Buddhist view of time, where the intention is to make

a moral point rather than to offer conceptual or other exegesis. A verse-riddle in the *Jātaka* collection, along with its commentary, says:

> Time (*kala*) eats all beings, along with itself,
> But the one who eats time cooks the cooker of beings.

'Time' refers to such things as the morning and mid day meals. 'Beings' here means living beings; time does not (actually) consume beings by tearing off their skin and flesh, but it is said to 'eat' and 'consume' them by wasting away their life, beauty and strength, crushing their youth, and destroying their health ... It leaves nothing, but eats everything, not only beings but also itself; (that is to say) the time of the morning meal does not reach the time of the mid day meal, and likewise with the time of the mid day meal (and what follows). 'The one who eats time' is a name for the Enlightened person, for he wastes away and eats the time of rebirth in the future by the Noble Path ... 'Cooks the cooker of beings' (means): he has cooked the craving which cooks beings in hell, burnt it and reduced it to ashes.

The most common Pali word for time, as here, *kāla*, has two specific senses in addition to the general one: (i) a particular, fixed or appointed time, the right time, opportunity, etc.; (ii) death, as in the common verbal phrase *kālaṃ karoti*, literally to do/complete one's time. The negative *akāla* is used to mean at a wrong/improper/unusual time; the form *akālika* can have this sense, but usually it means 'not taking time', 'immediate'; this is especially common in a series of predicates applied to the Buddha's teaching (the *Dhamma*): it is 'to be seen here and now (*sandiṭṭhika*), immediate, (inviting one to) "come and see", leading onwards, to be realized individually by the wise'. The connection between *akālika* in this sense, and different connotations of *kāla* as time (of life), opportunity, and death, is cleverly brought out in a conversation between a handsome young monk called Samiddhi and a goddess who tries to seduce him, as he stands dressed in a

single under-robe after a bath in the morning before going on his alms-round. She addresses him in a verse, using the verbs √*bhuñj*, which can mean both to eat and to enjoy, the latter often implying specifically sexual pleasure, and the desiderative form (*bhikk*-) of √*bhaj*, which means 'want to have a share of', or more simply 'beg', and is the root of the noun *bhikkhu*, standardly translated as 'monk':

Abhutvana bhikkhasi bhikkhu; na hi bhutvana bhikkhasi;

You haven't eaten [i.e., yet today], monk, and (so) you are going begging (for alms); you go begging as a monk without having enjoyed (yourself first);

bhutvana bhikkhu bhikkhassu, ma taṃ kalo upaccaga ti.

Enjoy yourself (first), monk, and then beg for alms don't let (the) time pass you by.

The commentaries explain that *kāla* here means 'time of youth', and that she was telling him to enjoy pleasures while he was young (both, it would seem, in the immediate and in the medium-term future), and become a monk in old age. Given the situation, she is also telling him not to miss his (present) opportunity; in colloquial English, she is offering him the time of his life. But Samiddhi replies: 'I do not know (when will be) the time (of my death); the time (of death) is hidden, it is not seen. Therefore I beg for alms without having enjoyed (the pleasures of youth); may the time [sc. the opportunity to practise the celibate life] not pass me by' (*kālaṃ vo 'haṃ na jānāmi, channo kālo na dissati; tasmā abhutvā bhikkhāmi, mā maṃ kālo upaccagā ti*). She tries again: you are young, enjoy the pleasures of life; 'Don't give up what is before your eyes (*sandiṭ-ṭhikaṃ* – notably herself) and go running after what takes time' (*kālikaṃ*; another translation could be 'what you have to wait for'). Samiddhi insists that he has given up what takes time, and is seeking after what is immediate. Sense-pleasures, the Buddha has taught

him, are what take time: they are unsatisfactory, full of unrest and danger. On the contrary, 'the *Dhamma* (= the Teaching, the Truth) is to be seen here and now, immediate'.

Nirvana is most commonly presented in secondary sources as freedom from rebirth, as are other Indian ideas of liberation; but as the pre-Buddhist history of ideas sketched earlier makes clear, the first suggestions of what was later to become a theory of rebirth (*punarjanman*) were in fact fears of redeath (*punarmṛtyu*). 'Deathless', or 'death-free' (*amata*), is both a predicate standardly applied to nirvana, and a substantive used as a synonym for it. It is the Pali form of the Sanskrit *amṛta*, but unlike that term in Vedic literature it does not mean continuing life or vitality as opposed to death. It refers to a place (metaphorically), state, or condition where there is no death, because there is also no birth, no coming into existence, nothing made by conditioning, and therefore no time. There is, to be sure, an inherent paradox in referring to an enlightened person's attaining timelessness, a paradox comparable to that in religions that have a doctrine of creation and are forced to use finite verbs to denote the beginning of time. Finite verbs presuppose the continuum of past – present – future, which in both cases does not apply. In the Buddhist case, the best way of interpreting the situation is to assume that everything that happens, all the action as it were, is produced by conditioned elements. The process of conditioning, and so of time, can self-destruct, so that time ceases to exist, at least for an individual. From the perspective of time-bound, conditioned existence, and the temporally structured language that expresses it, it is possible to say that someone enters timelessness, 'nirvanizes' (the event is usually referred to by a verbal form), etc.; but the temporal event denoted by such terms is not anything directly occurring in or to nirvana, but rather the ending-moment of the conditioned process. Unlike all other such moments, therefore, this has a relation to the past, but not to the future.

NIRVANA IN LIFE AND AFTER DEATH

One might think that the difference between an Enlightened person before and after death was simple enough, given that the contrast between life and death is fairly unmistakable (leaving aside the genuine problem of the precise moment at which death occurs). But there has been some confusion here, both because some scholars have conflated the two, either in order to argue a particular case or inadvertently, and because of the way the two words *nirvāṇa* and *parinirvāṇa* (Pali: *nibbāna*, *parinibbāna*) are used: both can be used *both* (i) for what happened to the Buddha at the age of thirty-five under the Bo tree, and when any person attains Enlightenment (becomes an *Arahant*, a 'worthy one'), *and* (ii) for what happened when the Buddha was eighty at Kusinārā, after a lifetime's career as a teacher, and for the end of any enlightened person's life. (There is also a third, which applies to Buddhas only, the (*pari*)*nirvāṇa* of the relics, to be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 5.) Two dichotomies used in this regard can be found in the commentary to a text in which the past passive participle *parinibbuta* is used as an epithet for someone (the speaker) who is obviously still alive. The monk Dabba, punning on his own name, which means 'worthy' exclaims: 'He who was hard to tame has been tamed by the taming (of the Path); he is worthy, contented, with doubts overcome, victorious, without fear; Dabba has steadied himself, and has reached nirvana.' The commentary to 'has attained nirvana' (*parinibbuto*) reads:

There are two nirvanas [or: forms of nirvana], that of the Defilements, which is the nirvana element with a remainder of grasping, and that of the Aggregates, which is the nirvana element with no remainder of grasping. Of these (two) that of the Defilements is intended here. So the meaning is (that) '(he has) attained nirvana' through the nirvana of the Defilements,

because he has, by means of the Path, completely abandoned the Existents which one must abandon (in order to be Enlightened).

Although the distinction between Enlightenment and final Nirvana is quite clear, texts do not always make it, either because it is obvious which of the two 'quenchings' is in question, or because the distinction is not relevant to the point being made. Often descriptions of final nirvana are applied to a living Arahant proleptically, as what will be true of him or her. An example is one of the earliest appearances of the later standard dichotomy between nirvana with or without 'a remainder of attachment', a passage worth quoting as a whole:

> [In prose:] There are two elements of nirvana … that with a remainder of attachment and that without. What is [the former]? Here a monk is an Arahant, with Corruptions destroyed, one who has lived (the holy life), done what was to be done, laid down the burden, attained the goal, with the fetters of existence wholly destroyed, released through right knowledge. In him the five (sense)faculties remain, and because they are intact he experi ences what is pleasant and unpleasant, enjoyable or painful. The destruction of passion, hatred, and delusion in him is what is called the element of nirvana with a remainder of attachment. What is the element of nirvana without a remainder of attachment? Here a monk is an Arahant, with Corruptions destroyed … released through right knowledge. In him right here [i.e., at the end of this life] all feelings, no longer rejoiced in, will become cold …
>
> [In verse:] These two elements of nirvana are set out by him who sees, the independent Sage. One element is to be seen here [and now], through the complete destruction of that which leads to (future) rebirth; but the element without a remainder of attachment, in which all existences utterly cease, occurs in the future. Those who know the unconditioned state, with minds released, through the destruction of that which leads to rebirth, have reached the core of the Teaching, and rejoicing in (that) destruction, have abandoned all births.

In the prose part of this text, the phrase 'the element of nirvana without a remainder of attachment' is applied to the living Arahant proleptically, as is clear in the future tense 'will become cold', and as the verses say explicitly. The commentary explains 'will become

cold' as 'will cease in (that) cessation which is without [subsequent] rebirth'. 'Remainder of attachment' refers to the saint's mental and bodily processes and his or her experience of life-in-*saṃsāra*, which remain between the time of Enlightenment and that of final nirvana, due to the force of past karma. For most people, such as all Buddhas, there is an interval between the two stages of attaining nirvana. For some, however, the attainment of Enlightenment is said to be simultaneous with that of final nirvana: these are *samasīsa*, literally 'equal-headed', and defined as those in whom the exhaustion of the Corruptions (i.e., Arahantship) and the exhaustion of life happen at exactly the same moment.

To summarize, the following are the major terms used to refer to (1) nirvana in life and (2) nirvana after death:

1.
   - (i) the nirvana of the Defilements, *kilesa-(pari)nibbāna*
   - (ii) the nirvana-element with a remainder of attachment, *sa-upādi-sesa-(pari)nibbāna*
   - (iii) Enlightenment or Awakening, *bodhi*
   - (iv) Arahantship (= 'sainthood')
   - (v) various words for knowledge and for the transformation of psychology and behaviour
2.
   - (i) the nirvana of the Aggregates, *khandha-(pari)nibbāna*
   - (ii) the nirvana-element without a remainder of attachment, *an-upādi-sesa-(pari)nibbāna*
   - (iii) in narratives the event of death (= attaining final nirvana) is usually expressed by a verbal form from √*pari-nir-vā*

Nirvana in life is apparent in wisdom, skilfulness, and experience. The attainment of Arahantship is both a cognitive and an

affective transformation: to realize selflessness is both to acquire and retain knowledge – perhaps better said, wisdom or understanding – and to achieve a condition of the heart and mind in which all dispositions and traits that are harmful (in Buddhist eyes) are eliminated. A great deal has been written on this subject, and I mention here only a few things relevant to the overall theme of this book. There are a number of distinctions to be made between the Enlightenment of a Buddha and that of an Arahant, but for my purposes here it is possible to treat their attainment of nirvana in life as equivalent. The term *arahā* is often applied to the Buddha, and any enlightened person can be *buddha*, in its general sense of awakened or enlightened.

Wisdom

The content of Enlightenment is given variously as items of Buddhist doctrine, such as Dependent Origination, or summary versions of it. How best can one understand the 'knowledge' or 'wisdom' of Enlightenment? On an immediate level, of course, it is knowledge that certain propositions are true; it is also the cognitive or (to use William James's term) noetic events in which that knowledge is instantiated. But Enlightenment is supposed to be a matter neither simply of possessing knowledge (which at times must necessarily be unconscious, or understood in dispositional terms), nor of knowledge-events that exist only for a certain length of time, as someone might enter into a meditative trance for a specific period. Rather, it is supposed to be a continuous form of awareness present throughout any and every activity, achieved by and embodied in the practice of mindfulness. The training in mindfulness that leads to Enlightenment can be seen as learning a skill or skills, an education in certain capabilities. It is as much a fact or process of self-cultivation as

of self-knowledge (whose content, finally, is that there is no permanent self). One can use here the distinction between knowing *how* and knowing *that*, which has become customary in philosophy following Gilbert Ryle.[3] The former kind of knowledge refers not only to non-propositional skills, such as knowing how to swim or ride a bicycle; many features of this kind of knowledge are required for even the most abstract and formal cognitive operations. These skills are also forms of practice: they have to be learned through trial-and-error training, and they can be performed more or less successfully, more or less intelligently, more or less wisely. Pali words for enlightened knowledge can thus be seen to denote various forms of knowing *how*, as well as the knowledge *that* certain propositions are true. When a monk or nun practises for Enlightenment, he or she is practising a form of self-cultivation aimed at living selflessly, without suffering; the capacity to live and act thus, and the fact of doing so, are an essential part of what it means to be enlightened, to know that there is no self. To adapt R. R. Marett's remark about religion: Buddhist Enlightenment is not only thought out, but also danced out.[4]

Skilfulness

The transformation of consciousness and moral character effected by the attaining of nirvana in life, then, is cognitive, affective, and behavioural. The destruction of the conceit (that) 'I am', a synonym for Enlightenment, is a matter of inward experience and outward, visible conduct. The kind of deportment and bodily style expected of a serious monk or nun, and *a fortiori* of an enlightened one, is set out in a number of texts; not surprisingly it emphasizes careful and controlled body-movements. But here I consider rather the form of moral evaluation by which an enlightened person and his or her action are assessed. In what sense could someone who has attained

nirvana be or do 'good'? The answer distinguishes between two axes of moral evaluation. On the first, the two poles are what is *puñña*, meritorious or good, and what is *pāpa*, demeritorious or simply bad. Both merit and demerit are phenomena of karma and rebirth, and so acquiring merit, however useful in the short term in attaining good rebirth, is in the long run inimical to attaining nirvana. The other axis has as its two poles what is *kusala* and *akusala*, wholesome and unwholesome, or skilful and unskilful. These two axes overlap, but they are not the same. Everything that is meritorious is skilful, and everything which is bad is unskilful; but the reverse does not hold. There can be action that is skilful but that, because it is performed by an enlightened person without any trace of attachment or selfishness, does not accumulate merit. Such action is without Corruptions and so has no karmic result. (For the unenlightened also, it is possible to say that there are unskilful acts – minor infractions of the Monastic Rule, for example – which may hinder desired forms of practice and experience, but which are not bad in the sense that they do not produce a bad karmic result.) The action of an enlightened person is entirely *kusala*, entirely good but without karmic result.

If the Arahant's action is skilful but not meritorious, what of nirvana? Is it good, or wholesome? In the *Abhidhamma* classification scheme, where Existents can be *kusala*, *akusala*, or neither, (*avyākata*) 'indeterminate', the answer is no – unconditioned nirvana is indeterminate. It can, however, be misleading to speak too summarily, as some writers have, of nirvana as 'beyond good and evil' *tout court*, since the mental states and actions of a person who has attained nirvana in life are entirely good, in the sense of skilful, without Corruptions. But nonetheless it is clear that *final* nirvana (as opposed to an enlightened person before final nirvana), however much it may be the goal and rationale of all morality in

Buddhism, is not itself a moral phenomenon in the Buddhist sense; that is, it is not an attribute of (a) human action.

Experience

The most common thing said about nirvana in Buddhist texts is that it is the ending of suffering (*dukkha*). Clearly, after the death of the enlightened person, at the quenching of the Aggregates, there can be no *dukkha* in any of its three forms: there is no feeling, no change, and nirvana is unconditioned. In what sense does an enlightened person, before this final attainment, escape from suffering? 'There is no mental suffering for one who is without longing … All fears have been overcome by one who has destroyed his fetters.' Since by definition – in the Four Noble Truths – suffering is caused by desire or craving, the saint who is without craving cannot cause any more suffering. He or she can still experience pleasant and painful feelings, however, but since there is no attachment to them, no craving involved in the experiential process, in this sense there can be no mental pain. A number of stories about both Arahants and the Buddha make clear that they suffer both bodily pain and certain kinds of mental discomfort. One episode, found in a number of texts, concerns the Buddha's leaving the noisy and troublesome monks at Kosambi to live in the solitude of the forest with an elephant called Pārileyya. He had told the monks a number of *Jātaka* stories by way of admonition, but

> in spite of his admonition he was unable to reunite them. Thereupon, unhappy because of the crowded conditions under which he lived, he reflected, 'Under present conditions I am crowded and jostled and live a life of discomfort (*dukkhaṃ viharami*). Moreover, these monks pay no attention to what I say. Suppose I were to retire from the haunts of men and live a life of solitude?'

So even enlightened Buddhas can sometimes find things irksome, uncomfortable.

Apart from the general change in experience resulting from the absence of mental suffering, there are two meditative attainments which might be classed under the head of Experience made possible by Enlightenment, albeit that at least one of them seems more an absence of experience than a special kind of experience. In the present state of scholarship neither of these attainments is understood clearly, nor is the relationship between them. They are:

(i) the Attainment(s) of Fruition (*phalasamāpatti*) of the Path, the highest of which is, in some texts, associated with a meditative state called the Signless Liberation (or Concentration) of Mind (*animitta-ceto-vimutti*, or *-samādhi*); and

(ii) the Cessation of Perception/Ideation and Feeling (*saññāvedayita-nirodha*), also known as the Attainment of Cessation (*nirodha-samāpatti*). This Attainment is in some texts very closely associated with nirvana, even at times seeming to be a synonym.

It is not necessary or appropriate in a book such as this to investigate the (probably insoluble) intricacies and difficulties in what the texts say about the Attainment of Cessation. It seems likely that a number of originally independent schemes of meditation have been put together, and an attempt made, perhaps unsuccessfully, to blend two differing emphases in the path to salvation: that which sees it primarily as the inculcation of non-discursive, yogic, or enstatic states of consciousness (of which Cessation = Nirvana is the highest); and that which sees it as primarily the acquisition of wisdom or understanding, a wisdom that is expressible in discursive form, albeit that the instantiation of that wisdom may not be discursive in itself. Whatever the final conclusion on these issues, these meditative states are clearly seen as very highly advanced

conditions, which come close to being identified with the state of nirvana in life, even though they certainly cannot be said to exhaust the meaning of that term.

NIRVANA EXISTS

Nirvana after death is often described, in English, in paradoxical language, and it might seem difficult to see what could be meant by saying that it exists, in Pali or English. But that is what Theravāda thought says. In the lexicon of Buddhist systematic discourse nirvana is a real Existent, not merely a conceptual one; it is an element in the classificatory scheme of ultimately existing things. It is an *atthi-dhamma*, an Existent that (really) exists, not a *natthi-dhamma*, something that does not (as is the case, for example, with things that are conceptual objects of the Mental Sense-Base but that do not exist externally). The classification of nirvana as an external Existent is elaborated most carefully in *Abhidhamma* texts, but before dealing with them I consider a *Sutta* passage, widely cited in secondary literature, which asserts that nirvana exists.

The *Udāna*, 'Spirited Utterances', contain four *Sutta*-s, in each of which the Buddha 'instructs, rouses, heartens and delights' a group of monks 'with a talk connected with nirvana', and ends with a Spirited Utterance (*udāna*, the name of the collection as a whole). I deal here in detail only with the third, although the passages have clearly been redacted together as a group, in sequence, and this does affect interpretation of them. The passages are as follows:

1. That sphere (*āyatana**) exists, monks, where there is no earth, no water, no heat and no wind, where the sphere of infinite space does not exist, nor that of infinite consciousness, nor that of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; there is neither this world nor the other world, neither moon nor sun; there, I say,

there is no coming and going, no duration (of life, to be followed by) death and rebirth; it is not stationed, it is without occurrence(s), and has no object. This, indeed, is the end of suffering.

[*This word is being used here in a non-specific sense; as discussed below, it can refer to the objects of the mind, as sixth Sense-Base, among which *nibbāna* is included.]

2. It is hard indeed to see the desireless; it is not easy to see the truth.
   Craving is fully understood for one who knows; there is nothing (left) for one who sees.
3. There exists, monks, that [no substantive is used] in which there is no birth, where nothing has come into existence, where nothing has been made, where there is nothing conditioned. If that in which there is no birth …[etc.] did not exist, no escape here from what is [or: for one who is] born, become, made, conditioned would be known. But since there is that in which there is no birth, where nothing has come into existence, where nothing has been made, where there is nothing conditioned, an escape for what is [or: for one who is] born, become, made, conditioned is known.
4. For one who is attached there is uncertainty; for the unattached there is no uncertainty. When there is no uncertainty there is tranquillity; when there is tranquillity there is no yearning; when there is no yearning there is no coming-and-going; when there is no coming-and-going there is no dying and being reborn; when there is no dying and being reborn there is no 'here', 'there', or in between. This, indeed, is the end of suffering.

Unlike the others, the Third Utterance appears in the text as an argument rather than simple assertion(s), although it is not easy to see exactly what the argument is. It seems to offer three propositions:

1. Nirvana exists;
2. if it did not exist, there could be no escape from *saṃsāra*;
3. but since it does exist, there is therefore an escape from *saṃsāra*.

Stated abstractly, this is:

1. X exists;
2. if X did not exist, Y could not exist;
3. but X does exist, therefore Y exists.

In symbolic form this is, $\exists x$. If $-x \supset -y$. $\exists x \supset y$, which is fallacious. The same form of argument would hold for the following:

1. The Atlantic Ocean [= a mass of water, not earth, sand, or rock] exists;
2. if the Atlantic Ocean did not exist, swimming from Europe to America could not exist;
3. but the Atlantic Ocean does exist, therefore swimming from Europe to America exists.

This is obviously invalid; 1 and 2 hold, since the Atlantic Ocean exists and water is a necessary condition of swimming; but 3 does not follow, since the existence of water is a necessary but not sufficient condition for it to be possible to swim across oceans: other factors militate against that. In the case of the Third Utterance's argument, imagine, as did some Mahāyāna Buddhists, that there are beings who are intrinsically incapable of attaining nirvana; imagine further that all other beings have already attained nirvana. In this case, 1 and 2 would hold, i.e., that nirvana exists and that if it did not there would be no escape from *saṃsāra*; but not 3, since other factors militate against that: i.e., there must also exist beings capable of making such an escape, which in this case there are not.

One can save the Utterance from this fallacy by making either of two moves. First, in 2 and 3, Y may be understood not as the actual,

instantiated fact of escape from *saṃsāra*, but merely as the possibility of such escape (without discussing other factors). In this case the argument is valid. One can still dispute the major premise: the existence of nirvana here is not proved, or even argued for; it is merely stated. Second, the optative tenses in 2 can be taken precisely to assert that X is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for Y, and the words *yasmā* … *tasmā* (since … therefore) in 3 can be taken to assert further that X is indeed not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition for Y. This saves the sequence of assertions from formal fallacy, but once again, nirvana's existence has not been proved.

The Buddha is depicted as making these Utterances to an audience of monks: preaching to the converted, as it were. One might then assume that nirvana's existence is assumed by all concerned. But the commentary does not, although it does rely on a shared assumption of the efficacy of the Buddhist Path. It takes the First Utterance to be an argument that nirvana exists based on an argument from opposites; and the Third to be an assertion that nirvana exists based on an argument from the existence of the Path. It restates the point of the Third Utterance thus:

> Monks, if there were no Unconditioned Element whose individual nature is to be without birth, etc., then there would be no escape in this world from Form and the rest, which are called the Five Aggregates, whose individual nature it is to be characterized by birth, etc., and (their) remainderless calming would not be made known, would not occur, would not come about. But since the factors of the Eight fold Path, which occur with nirvana as their object, (do) completely cut off the Defilements with no remainder, from this the non occurrence of, the disappearance of, and the escape from all the suffering of rebirth are made known.

In this reading, the argument is: if and only if Nirvana exists can the Path be efficacious in completely removing the Defilements; since (as all concerned, speaker and audience, agree) it is thus efficacious,

nirvana therefore really exists, in the ultimate sense. The logical form of this argument is:

1. If and only if X [nirvana] exists, Y [the Path leading to escape from *saṃsāra*] exists.
2. Y exists,
3. therefore X exists.

The symbolic form of this is: Iff $x \supset y.\ \exists y \supset x$, which is valid, although it cannot prove the existence of nirvana to those who do not already accept 2. The commentary's exegesis could also be seen in the light of a different kind of philosophical analysis, whose argument is analogous to a Kantian transcendental deduction. One takes an existing phenomenon Y, and asks: 'What must be the case for Y to exist?'; and the answer is that the existence of X must be assumed. At the end of the commentary's remarks on this Utterance, it concludes: 'In these and other ways, the existence (*atthibhāva*) of the Unconditioned element in the ultimate sense can be shown by reasoning (*yuttito* [cf. Sanskrit *yukti*]).'

Does the unconditioned Existent nirvana exist in the same sense as conditioned Existents? In general usage the verb *atthi* in Pali has all the ambiguity and imprecision of the English 'to be'. One can distinguish between $atthi_1$ in the sense of *upalabbhati*, 'is found', i.e., exists as an Existent, a *dhamma* in the ultimate sense, and $atthi_2$ in the sense of *uppanna*, 'has arisen' (in the process of conditioning). Nirvana exists in the first sense, but not the second. The same point can be made by saying that conditioned things exist as occurrences or events, using the verb *vattati* with or without the prefix *pa* (Sanskrit: *pra-vartate*), whereas nirvana does not. This verb is from the Vedic root √*vṛt*, 'to turn', and it preserves echoes of the old Vedic idea of time as a turning wheel. In Sanskrit, the opposed terms *pravṛtti*, 'action', 'occurrence', and *nivṛtti*, 'quiescence',

'cessation', are standardly used to express the dichotomy between *saṃsāra* and *mokṣa*, rebirth and release. In Pali, *appavatta*, 'non-occurring' or 'non-occurrence', can be used as a predicate or synonym of nirvana. The opposed terms *vaṭṭa*, 'round' (of rebirth) and *vivaṭṭa*, 'absence of the round', express the point also, and preserve the Vedic wheel-image. Texts often describe the twelve elements of Dependent Origination as a wheel. The 'Wheel of Life' is, of course, a ubiquitous feature of all Buddhist iconography. It contains the twelve elements of Dependent Origination either as spokes or around the circumference, the three 'roots' of suffering (passion, hatred, and delusion) in the centre, and in between these, the five (sometimes six) possible rebirth Destinies: hell(s); the animal world; that of ghosts or spirits; the human world; and heaven(s). A term for such a Destiny, or such a world, is *gati*, literally a 'going'. Nirvana is sometimes called a *gati*, but it is not a Destiny in the same sense. It is, rather, the escape from all such destinies.

Although nirvana is 'wholly other' than all conditioned Existents, as an item of the Buddhist scholastic classification scheme it can be categorized like any other *dhamma*. In the *Abhidhamma* text *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*, nirvana is classed along with the four mental Aggregates as *nāma*, the mental. But it is also clearly distinguished from mind, in the subjective sense: it is not mind, not a concomitant of mind, and it is separate from mind. The apparent contradiction here, between nirvana as mental but not mind, can be explained as follows. In the classification of twelve Sense-Bases (*āyatana*, the six senses, including mind, and their objects), the mental is divided into Mind and Mental Objects or Data (*dhammā*). Nirvana is classed as a Mental Datum, part of the *dhammāyatana*, the Mental Data Base, but explicitly said not to be included in the Aggregates. Similarly, when to this list of twelve are added the six resultant sense-consciousnesses, to give eighteen Elements (*dhātu*), it is included in the *dhammadhātu*,

the Mental Data Element, but not classed with the Aggregates. That is to say, when the *Dhammasaṅgaṇi* classes nirvana alongside the four mental Aggregates as 'the mental', this is because it can be an object of awareness, not because it forms part of the mind of a person to whom it appears as a mental object. Since it is not classifiable within the Aggregates, it is external, not internal. The opposition between internal and external usually marks the distinction between the Existents occurring in the Aggregates called self and in those called other. But Cousins is surely right to suggest that 'external' (or as he renders it, 'without') can mean either (i) the within of other people, or (ii) everything which is not within.[5] Nirvana here is without or external in the latter sense.

Interpreters of Buddhism – including the *Oxford English Dictionary* ('Nirvana: In Buddhist theology, the extinction of individual existence and absorption into the supreme spirit, or the extinction of all desires and passions and attainment of perfect beatitude', which is about 50 per cent correct, although even the second definition needs commentary) – have often sought to understand nirvana in terms of the ideas of other traditions: for example, as the equivalent of *ātman/brahman*, said in the *Upaniṣad*-s to be characterizable only in negative terms; or even of the god of monotheism, seen in the perspective of negative theology, the *via negativa*, in which god's real nature cannot be known directly, but only by the resolute denial that he (or she, as is possible in India) is characterized by anything known in the created world. It seems clear from the kinds of passage cited here that this cannot be justified in terms of the emic categories of Buddhism itself. It may be that, from an external, etic perspective, those whose tastes run in the direction of syncretism might be able to insist on the fact that nirvana is said to exist, but to be ineffable, in order to make one or another kind of comparative assimilation. But a crucial difference between nirvana and god(dess),

the Hindu idea of *brahman*, the Chinese Tao, etc., is that nirvana is never said to be the origin or ground of the universe; to attain the ineffable, timeless state of nirvana is not to return to (union with) the source of things, but simply (!) to transcend time and suffering. There is no ultimate beginning of things in Buddhism.

In Buddhist texts in Sanskrit, as in Brahmanical texts, it became common to present doctrines in the form of actual or possible debates, either between Buddhists and non-Buddhists or between different schools within Buddhism. With the major exception of a text called *Kathā-vatthu* (‘Points of Controversy’), such debates are rare in Theravāda. There are, however, some passages of this kind in which the existence of nirvana is made an object of explicit argument, in three main ways:

(i) Nirvana exists, the only unconditioned Existent, the opposite of all conditioned Existents; that is to say, Nirvana exists, unlike the self postulated by non-Buddhists, the ‘nature’ posited by the Sāṃkhya system of Hinduism, or (impossible objects like) a hare’s horn.

(ii) It is not merely the destruction of the passions (greed, hatred, and illusion), or the non-existence of the Aggregates; that is, it is not merely an absence, but exists separately.

(iii) It is the object of the knowledge that arises in the Path; as an object of knowledge, it is not merely a concept, but a reality with ‘individual nature’ (*sabhāva*). If nirvana did not exist, or were merely the destruction of passion, etc., it could not be the object of the knowledge that arises in the Path, and so the Path would be futile. Nirvana can be seen by the knowledge that arises in the Path, but it is not merely an object of mind: it is an external, unconditioned reality. For this reason, it can be known, but it cannot be produced or caused. This last point is

> not special to Buddhism; some version of it is present, probably, in all religions (one cannot 'take heaven by storm'), and it is an issue, perhaps a paradox, that underlies all Indian religion. The path to the goal cannot be said straightforwardly to cause the goal, since that would make it part of the conditioned universe from which liberation is sought; but at the same time the goal cannot be completely unrelated to the path to it, for obvious reasons. Different traditions have had different levels of looseness of fit between their path and its goal; perhaps the most general formal solution has been to hold that the path is a necessary but not sufficient condition for attaining the goal. In the Theravāda case, it is not possible to realize nirvana without the Path; the Path, the fourth Noble Truth, is a Conditioned Existent, part of the conditioned world, whereas nirvana, the third Truth, is the (only) Unconditioned Existent.

CAN ONE DESIRE NIRVANA?

This chapter so far has endeavoured to stay close to the modes of exposition used in Pali texts, and to categories of thought that occur in Pali and Sanskrit. Now I pose a question which is – in English – important, but which could not occur (in the same profoundly ambiguous form) in Pali or Sanskrit; there is an answer to it in English, but also in Pali technical terms, which will further elucidate Buddhist systematic thought.

The question 'Can one desire nirvana?' is one that crops up standardly in introductory classes or discussions of Buddhism; indeed, it should do, if those involved are paying attention. The point can be put a number of ways: if desire is the cause of all suffering, what about the desire for nirvana itself? This can be

generalized to all action viewed under a Buddhist guise: is not the motivation of any purposive action governed by desire – if only in the formal sense that its purpose is the achievement of some goal – and so the idea of being desireless is either self-contradictory or destined, logically speaking, to end in schizophrenic catatonia? The first answer to this is one of English usage: it would be better to talk of the aspiration to nirvana rather than the desire for it, of purposive action as intentionally oriented towards its goal rather than as desiring it. Less blandly, one can say that nirvana is not the kind of thing towards which affective states of desire, in the Buddhist pejorative sense, can be directed. The classic term for 'desire' in the pejorative sense, as in the Second Truth (that suffering is caused by desire), is *taṇhā* (Sanskrit *tṛṣṇā*), literally 'thirst', a term that centrally, though not only, refers to sexual desire. By way of comparison, imagine a young and excitable Christian nun exclaiming: 'Oh, I really *lust after* being selfless like Mother Theresa!' Leaving aside any judgments about whether this is a correct view of Mother Theresa, or about the usefulness of imitating her, it is surely obvious that in such a case one would want to say something like: 'Look, being like that (i.e., what you suppose her to be like) is something you can't lust after: either you are mistaken about what your affective state in this matter really is, or you have simply misused the word. Lust can take as its object only people or things viewed as means of sexual gratification.' Correspondingly, what Buddhism would call desire in the bad sense simply cannot take nirvana as its object. Of course desire (perhaps in all but the sexual senses) can certainly be directed towards the *idea* of nirvana, to the concept or even the word. But to understand the nature of nirvana, not as a concept or as a word, but as the real Existent referred to by them, it is necessary to understand more clearly what affective states can and cannot take it as their intentional object.

One can put this most precisely by using Buddhist technical terms. The adjectival pair *sāsava/anāsava*, with and without Corruptions, is applied to affective states, intentional actions, and other things. Almost all words used to denote emotions and intentions can be described as one or the other. Happiness (*sukha*), for example, can be with or without Corruptions; the former is 'the happiness of the round of rebirth, brought into being by conditions', the latter is 'the happiness of nirvana, not brought into being by conditions'. Happiness with Corruptions includes things not in the Buddhist Path but not in themselves (for certain agents) bad karma, as well as the results of good karma. The desire of a married couple for each other, for example, does not break the third Precept (against 'misbehaviour in sexual matters'); and making merit to gain well-being either in this life or the next is unequivocally a good action, albeit a second best. (In the terms used earlier, it is meritorious and so skilful; but there are modes of skilful action that are situated above merit and its results.) But there are certain states that cannot be without Corruptions, certain words to which it is not possible to add the adjective *anāsava*: the two most obvious, perhaps, are *taṇhā*, often translated 'Craving', and *upādāna*, 'attachment, clinging'. To suppose that such emotions, and actions based on them, could be directed to nirvana would simply be, in Buddhist terms, a category mistake. So if the question 'Can one desire nirvana?' presupposes this sense of the English word 'desire', the answer is no; if desire is understood in such a way that it could represent a Buddhist psychological term of which *anāsava* could be predicated, the answer is yes, but that has nothing to do with the second Noble Truth, and so neither self-contradiction nor catatonia can be in question.

When a person makes a resolution or expresses the aspiration to Buddhahood or nirvana, among the words used are *abhinihāra*,

panidhi, *paṭṭhāna*, and *saṅkappa*, as in the second component of the Eight-fold Path, *sammā-saṅkappa*, Right Resolve. None of these can be used for a 'desire' in the relevantly pejorative sense.

SILENCE AND THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING

This chapter has tried to articulate what Buddhist systematic thought says about the concept of nirvana. It is a real, external, and timeless Existent, not merely a concept; the *Abhidhamma* classification scheme places it in the categories of Mental Object Sense-Base and Mental Object Element, but not in any of the Aggregates, bodily or mental. It is the ultimate goal of Buddhist soteriology, to be attained both experientially, in this life – as the Destruction of the Corruptions, the possession of wisdom/skilfulness and the absence of mental suffering – and as an object of consciousness for those on the Path, momentarily and for longer periods. It is also the state or condition – metaphorically, the place – that is the destiny of an Arahant or Buddha after death (but it is not a Destiny within the universe). It *is*, ontologically, but it is not the origin of things, the ground of being. For Buddhists, whether practitioners of the Path or ordinary people, the appropriate response is to accept on faith – better, with confidence or trust, *saddhā* – that nirvana exists as described, and to aspire to achieve it, in the shorter or longer term. As is often said – much more often, indeed, in books about Buddhism than in Buddhist texts – useless speculation beyond what is given in the teaching is simply a hindrance to practice.

This, as far as I can see, is all that is said about nirvana as a concept. It is, I submit, quite clear; but it is also clear that external academic scholarship cannot and should not stop at this point: it wants, rightly, to ask more questions. The issue is: how to find a

way to understand nirvana from the external (etic) point of view that preserves the internal (emic) characterization of it, without simply restating what that is.

I have said that previous scholarly discussions of nirvana have often wrongly attempted to produce a quasi-Buddhist account, an account that accepts Buddhist conceptual presuppositions but not the conclusions Buddhists have drawn from them, and which does not respect the silences they have preserved. It is possible now to begin to specify more precisely what that means, although the argument cannot be complete within this chapter. If, as an historical scholar, one is attempting to understand what nirvana meant, as a matter of conscious reflection, to the authors, redactors, and audiences of the texts that make up the Pali imaginaire, then one must both elucidate what was done with nirvana within the conceptual matrix of systematic thought, and accept what was not done, without making the imperialist attempt to place oneself in Buddhists' shoes and 'do it better', by filling in the silences, vocalizing their meaning. Silence outside discourse means, of course, nothing by itself. Silences within discourse, on the other hand, are part of the way it produces meaning; and this is especially important in ideology, where silences, moves not made and paths not taken, are often best construed not as deficiencies of vision or of logical acuity, but as choices. With the exception of the meditation state of Cessation, it is my view that if there are aporias in Buddhist thinking about nirvana – the next chapter discusses two – they are there on purpose: not because of inadequacy or failure, but because the silences in and around the concept of nirvana are part of the production of meaning in the discourse of felicity.

External interpretation should not take the form of supplying extra semantic content beyond that which is given to the concept of nirvana in the texts. As adumbrated in Chapter 1 and to be further

explored in Chapter 4, I suggest that we should see nirvana as having the syntactic value of a closure-marker, structurally and narratively. But there is, first, more to be said about the semantics of nirvana: speaking of, and leaving silences about, nirvana in terms of its position in a taxonomy of systematic thought is not the only way Buddhists have had of speaking about it, or of remaining silent. It is also necessary to investigate the imagery of nirvana: metaphors, but not *merely* metaphors; they are constitutive as well as illustrative, an irreducible part of the imaginative work of Buddhist culture, which, I argue, both informs and interconnects systematic and narrative modes of thought. Here too, just as Buddhist thinkers are concerned with the nature and limits of what is sayable in the description of existence (= Existents), so the interpreter of Buddhism must be concerned with the nature and limits of what is sayable in interpretation.

CHAPTER 3

Nirvana as an image

In reflecting on the imagery of nirvana, one must aspire simultaneously to (at least) two intellectual virtues: rigour and flexibility, while at the same time recognizing that there are limits, of various kinds, to what one can know. The historical philology of words can be productive of definite knowledge, and strict, close analysis of the words *nirvāṇa/nibbāna*, and of the various epithets, synonyms, verbs, etc., used in connection with them, is vital in clarifying the idea(s) they express; but at the same time, one must ask: how far can one know that people who use language are aware of the etymology of the words they use, or even if they are so aware, whether it matters to the way they are using them? The answer to such questions, I think, in language-users of whatever degree of education, is sometimes 'yes', sometimes 'partially', sometimes 'not much, if at all'. In Buddhist traditions, as generally in South Asia, it was an accepted fact that there was one discipline, which corresponds to what the English word 'grammar' means (Sanskrit: *vyākaraṇa*; Pali: *veyyākaraṇa*, literally 'explanation, elucidation, analysis'), that was astoundingly sophisticated and thoroughly rule-governed. At the same time, there was another discipline, practised by the same people and often at the same time, which is usually but very misleadingly called 'folk etymology' in modern academic works (Sanskrit: *nirukti*; Pali: *nirutti*), but which I prefer to call 'creative etymologizing'. The two traditions go back to the

earliest phase of intellectual activity in South Asia, Vedic exegesis, where the ideology of the plenitude of meaning in Vedic texts led interpreters to assume that whatever senses they could find in Vedic words were bearers of truth; and though on occasion creative etymologizers might draw on so-called 'popular' traditions, they frequently used very sophisticated linguistic knowledge as a basis for their creativity. Many words, perhaps all to some extent, contain metaphors as well as direct denotation of things and/or ideas; how can one know whether these metaphors are, as we say, alive or dead? (The phrases 'live' and 'dead metaphor' are themselves usually dead metaphors in English.) In *Selfless Persons*, I tried to show, following in the footsteps of many previous writers, that metaphors are very frequently not, or not merely, illustrative of some otherwise articulable 'literal' language of thought (whatever that might mean); they are constitutive of thought, both on an individual level and – still more, and for this discussion still more importantly – for collective traditions. Here I will try to do the same thing.

Most readers of this book will not know either Pali or Sanskrit. I will therefore simply state the linguistic facts, as they are known. Philologists will be aware, naturally, that in any science one is dealing with hypotheses which are never certain, only plausible to one or another degree; I have tried to give either the consensus among contemporary scholars, or at least what I take to be the most plausible specialist view. I will, however, have to cite a number of Pali words – the point being, for non-specialists, to keep track to some extent, as the discussion progresses, of whether the English words given in tentative translation are referring to the same or different terms in the original. Perhaps in some cases teachers using this book may have linguistic knowledge to explain further. (Note that for technical reasons, verbal roots are cited in Sanskrit form;

knowing some Sanskrit is a necessary but not sufficient condition for understanding Pali philology.)

THE WORDS (*PARI*)*NIRVĀṆA* AND (*PARI*)*NIBBĀNA*; OTHER REFERRING TERMS AND DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

Sanskrit *nirvāṇa* is *nibbāna* in Pali, just as *parvata*, 'mountain', is *pabbata*. (Variations between cerebral/retroflex *ṇ* and dental *n* in Pali and Sanskrit are perhaps due to differences in Northwestern and Northeastern dialects.)[1] *Nirvāṇa* is derived from the verbal root √*vā*, to blow, with the prefix *nis* (changed to *nir* before *v*), the most common sense of which is negative or privative. From the earliest Sanskrit texts *nir-vā* has been used intransitively: 'to go out, be extinguished'. Causative (and so transitive) forms of the verb are common: 'to make go out, extinguish'. English 'blow out' and 'quench' are useful translations in both cases, since they can be intransitive or transitive. *Nirvāṇa* in Sanskrit can be a past participle/adjective meaning 'blown out', but it is more commonly used in both Sanskrit and Pali as a noun, referring to the event or process of blowing out, quenching, or to the resultant state, or both. When the term is used as a soteriological metaphor in Buddhism the standard image is not of wind or some other agent actively putting out a fire, but of a fire's going out through lack of fuel:

> Just as an oil lamp burns because of oil and wick, but when the oil and wick are exhausted, and no others are supplied, it goes out through lack of fuel (*anaharo nibbayati*), so the [enlightened] monk … knows that after the break up of his body, when further life is exhausted, all feelings which are rejoiced in here will become cool.

An enlightened nun recalls: 'Then taking a lamp I entered my cell … [and] taking a needle I drew out the wick. The complete

release of my mind was like the quenching of the lamp (*padīpass' eva nibbānaṃ*).' As shown in the previous chapter, *parinibbāna* and *parinibbuta* can be used for both Enlightenment and final nirvana (and the nirvana of the relics); the prefix *pari*, if it adds anything, adds a slight intensification, often lost in practice. Traditional exegesis often offers creative etymologies: for example, taking *vāna/vāṇa* to be the same as *vana*, 'desire', and so *nirvāṇa/nibbāna* as 'without desire'; or as *vāna*-sewing, so that *nirvāṇa/nibbāna* is to abandon the desire (*taṇhā*) that weaves together life after life; or as *vana*, 'forest', construed metaphorically as the forest of Defilements, etc., where dangerous wild animals live, so that to be *nibbāna* is to be free from that forest and those dangers.

It is common in English to speak of attaining or entering nirvana, but in Pali simple verbal forms from the roots √(*pari*-)*nir-vā* are by far the most common means of referring to the events, and states, of Enlightenment and final nirvana. It is also common to say that the Buddha 'died', or to refer to the 'death' of an enlightened person; sometimes equivalent words are used in Pali, but this usage can be misleading. In certain contexts it seems useful to me to coin the English term *nirvanize*, inelegant though it is, as an attempt to preserve both the form and the ambiguities of the Pali.

Various verbs are used on occasion with the substantive *nibbāna* as their object; examples include forms derived from the roots √*gam*, 'to go', and √*adhi-gam*, 'to go to or reach'. Both of these verbs can have the meaning 'to understand' (i.e., reach by knowledge), so no spatial metaphor need be implied; verbs of knowing (√*jan*) and seeing (√*dṛś*) are also used. Forms derived from √*p*(*r*)*a-āp* and √*ā-rādh*, both meaning 'to reach or attain', are found. The most common Pali verb meaning 'to enter', √*p*(*r*)*a-vis*, is not found with *nibbāna* in the earlier texts; however, both *okkamāna*, a participle/noun from √*o-kam*, 'to descend', and *ogadha*, traditionally taken to be from

√*o-gāh*, 'to dive into', are used with a general sense of 'entering'. Lastly, one finds in some post-canonical texts the verb √*pra-skand* (Pali: √*pa-kkhand*), literally 'to jump, leap, or fall into'. In all these cases, and others not cited, no doctrine of nor attitude to nirvana is to be inferred from the linguistic usage. One of the commonest uses of the verb √*o-kam*, 'descend', for example, is in connection with sleep; English 'fall asleep' is a close parallel, but it makes no sense to infer that either nirvanizing or going to sleep (as opposed to going to bed) involves downward spatial movement. These metaphors are dead.

In what is traditionally regarded as the Buddha's first sermon after his Enlightenment, he explains the third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering, as 'the fading away without remainder and cessation of that same craving, giving it up, relinquishing it, letting it go, not clinging to it'. A standard commentarial exegesis of this explains:

> 'Fading away without remainder', 'cessation' and so on are all just synonyms for nirvana (*nibbana vevacanan' eva*). For on coming to nirvana, craving fades away without remainder and ceases, and so it is called 'the fading away without remainder' and cessation of that same craving. And on coming to nirvana, craving is given up, relinquished, let go of, is not clung to, and so nirvana is called … 'giving up, relinquishing, letting go, non clinging'.
>
> For nirvana is one and the same. The names for it are just various synonyms, through their being the opposite of the names of all conditioned things, such as fading away without remainder and cessation, giving up, relinquishing, letting go, non clinging, destruction of greed, destruction of hate, destruction of delusion, destruction of craving, that (place, sphere, state, etc.) where there is no arising, no process, no sign(s), no longing, no striving, no rebirth, no (re)appearance, no (rebirth) destiny, no birth, no aging, no disease, no death, no distress, no grief, no unrest, no defilement.

Such synonyms are used ubiquitously in place of the word *nibbāna* throughout Pali literature; some more examples are:

the end, (the place, state) without corruptions, the truth, the further (shore), the subtle, very hard to see, without decay, firm, not liable to dissolution, incomparable, without differentiation, peaceful, deathless, excellent, auspi cious, rest, the destruction of craving, marvellous, without affliction, whose nature is to be free from affliction, *nibbana* [presumably here in one or more creative etymology, = e.g., non-forest], without trouble, dispassion, purity, freedom, without attachment, the island, shelter (cave), protection, refuge, final end, the subduing of pride (or 'intoxication'), elimination of thirst, destruction of attachment, cutting off of the round (of rebirth), empty, very hard to obtain, where there is no becoming, without misfortune, where there is nothing made, sorrow-free, without danger, whose nature is to be without danger, profound, hard to see, superior, unexcelled (without superior), unequalled, incomparable, foremost, best, without strife, clean, flawless, stainless, happiness, immeasurable, (a firm) standing point, possessing nothing.

A similar, even longer list is found in the medieval grammar *Saddanīti*; the terms are called *pariyāya-vacanāni*, 'figurative' or 'metaphorical expressions'.

Many of the terms given as synonyms or meanings of nirvana are negative or privative in grammatical form. A scholastic digest of *Abhidhamma*, the *Mohavicchedanī*, says that nirvana has 'infinite modes', since it can be opposed to all the categories of Conditioned Existents; it cites as examples 'not mind, not associated with mind, not matter, not past, not future, not present, not the Path, not the Fruit (of the Path)'. The terms used to denote the Conditioned Existents of Buddhist Ultimate Truth, and still more the descriptive terms used for *saṃsāra* in Conventional Truth, can be positive or negative grammatically, and so the opposed term for nirvana will be negative or positive in form correspondingly. The widespread use of grammatically negative forms has led many to interpret the doctrine of nirvana as essentially a *via negativa*, an *apophasis*, an interpretation the previous chapter has already argued against. But

it is certainly true that the failure of words to describe nirvana, its inexpressibility or ineffability, is a universal trope.

In the previous chapter, timeless nirvana was opposed to the three times, past, present, and future. These times are called subjects of discourse, or things one can talk about (*kathā-vatthūni*); in one text the Buddha mentions them, and then breaks into verse:

> People think in terms of what is expressible (*akkheyya saññino*),
> they establish themselves on what is expressible;
> not (properly) understanding what is expressible,
> they fall under the power of death …
> Whoever is endowed with (understanding of) what is expressible,
> at peace, delighting in the peaceful realm,
> practising carefully and standing (firm) in the Doctrine,
> that wise one is beyond (all) reckoning (*saṅkhaṃ n' opeti*).

To be beyond reckoning here is to attain a state within life which cannot be counted among the categories of the temporal, conditioned world; the same thing is true, obviously and *a fortiori*, of the Arahant after death. Another verse says that the saint has 'gone down' [that is, has set, like the sun] and is no longer measurable (*atthaṃgato so na pamāṇaṃ eti*); the commentary explains that this can refer either to the Arahant or to final nirvana. When a questioner asks the Buddha first whether the saint after death is conscious, and then whether he exists, he replies:

> Just as a flame put out by a gust of wind
> goes down and is beyond reckoning,
> so the sage free from name and form
> goes down and is beyond reckoning …
> There is no measuring of one who has gone down,
> there is nothing by which he might be discussed;

> when all attributes (*dhamma*) are removed
> so have all ways of speaking been removed.

The extinguished flame is of course the best-known image of nirvana in the West. In one text, the ascetic Vacchagotta questions the Buddha about where the enlightened person is reborn; on receiving the reply that the verb 'is reborn' is inapplicable, he asks if it is the case that such a person is not reborn. The Buddha replies that this term is also inapplicable (according to the commentary, this was because Vacchagotta would have interpreted this as Annihilation; that is, he would have understood nirvana as nothingness). He uses the analogy of a fire gone out: just as without fuel a fire goes out and one cannot say where it has gone to, so it is impossible to point out the enlightened person, since he is 'freed from reckoning' by the Five Aggregates. He continues with another image: the enlightened person is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable like the great ocean. (This text is discussed further below.) At the end of the very first *Sutta* in the *Sutta-piṭaka*, the *Brahmajāla*, the Buddha says that his body 'remains (alive) with that which leads to rebirth cut off … while his body remains, so long will gods and men see him; (but) after the break-up of the body, at the exhaustion of life, they will not see him'. The commentary here employs a term often used in exegeses of both Enlightenment-in-Life and final nirvana: he will then have reached a state beyond designation or conceptualization, *appaññatika-bhāva* (also spelled *appaṇṇatika-*). Many other such terms are used: (the) not expressed (*anākkhata*), not describable (*avattabba*), beyond the sphere of reason (*atakkavacāra*), not characterized by discursive thought (*avitakka-avicāra*), unthinkable (*acintiya*), (the state of being) non-manifest (*apātubhāva*), free from conceptual differentiation (*nippapañca*), (the state of being) unseeable (*a[ni]dassana-bhāva*); disappearing (as a noun, *antaradhāna*; also in verbal forms).

TWO APORIAS: CONSCIOUSNESS AND HAPPINESS

Consciousness

Consciousness is one of the Five Aggregates, and the Cessation of the Aggregates is final nirvana: consciousness, at least in this sense, cannot exist in nirvana. A person's consciousness is transformed at the moment of Enlightenment, and comes to an end when he or she nirvanizes at the end of that life: constructive-consciousness (that which constructs new life through Conditioning Factors) comes to an end at Enlightenment, while constructed-consciousness (continuing experience, existing because of past Conditioning Factors) comes to an end with the last conscious moment of life. One text and its commentary use the analogy of firing a pot: when a pot has been fired in an oven it is taken out and set on a level piece of ground; it does not cool immediately, but does so after some time, and only the inanimate pieces of the pot then remain. So too the Arahant, set on the level ground of unconditioned nirvana after attaining Enlightenment, does not nirvanize on the same day, but lives as long as fifty or sixty years before he does so 'after the arising of (his) last (moment of) consciousness'; thereafter only his bodily relics are left.

As said earlier, the most common word used to refer to the last event of an enlightened person's life is the verb √*nir-vā*, with or without the prefix *pari-*, but texts do speak of such a person's 'death'. Exegetical texts distinguish:

(i) momentary death, the constant dissolution of conditioned phenomena;

(ii) conventional death, which is when, as ordinary language has it, a person dies; in more precise terminology – in Buddhist terms, in Ultimate Truth – this is 'the cutting off of the life-faculty included within a single life'; and

(iii) 'death as (complete) cutting off', which is an Arahant's death, not followed by rebirth.

From an external point of view, the third sense of death might well seem to be the kind of not-living that Bernard Williams meant, in his argument about Elina Makropulos's 'immortality', by referring to a 'superior sort of death', after a series of lives. But for Buddhism, 'does not exist' is one of the four possibilities for the state of an enlightened person after his or her nirvanizing that are explicitly rejected. On the conceptual level there is an impasse, at least in the articulation of systematic thought: nirvana is the cessation of the consciousness Aggregate, but that is not equivalent to becoming non-existent: it is beyond designation. A nirvanized consciousness is not non-existent, in the sense in which the past does not exist, nor in the sense in which entities such as a self or person independent of the process of conditioning do not exist: it is untraceable.

One might be tempted to say, as has indeed sometimes been said, in quasi-Buddhist terms, that apropos the Enlightened person 'in' nirvana, existence and non-existence here are two extremes, between which Buddhism proposes the Middle Way. But for a scholar to say only that would do no more than reproduce a cliché, putting on a Buddhist disguise and pretending to say something illuminating from a scholarly perspective. A better interpretive strategy, I suggest, is to see this as an example of the way silences within discourse are themselves part of the production of meaning. For Buddhism, rebirth as an ongoing system involves human (and other) lives occurring *seriatim* in beginninglessly conditioned individual sequences of karmic causality, spatially continuous in each lifetime from the birth-moment of the body to its death-moment, and temporally

continuous as constantly changing consciousness-series throughout. Persons are strung along this series like pearls on a thread. What is thus *said* gives the Unsaid – unconditioned nirvanic existence and happiness – an immediate *point d'appui* in the understanding, since the idea of conditioning carries with it, as a silent companion, its own opposite. The lexical items *saṃkhārā*, Conditioning Factors, and *saṃkhata*, the conditioned, come always already equipped with their own negation, *asaṃkhata*, the Unconditioned. This Unconditioned exists, semantically, in relationship to what is said, as a silent, unsayable Unsaid, a moment in the dynamics of discourse. The absence of a cosmogony in Buddhism means that there is no systematic articulation, no overt *saying*, of how such sequences of conditioned consciousness came into being, originally, in a metaphysical or ontological sense; what is beginningless cannot have a beginning. (In a psychological sense, moment to moment, they come into being through ignorance and Conditioning Factors.) Correspondingly, what is left when conditioned consciousness goes out of being is also Unsaid; Buddhist final salvation, one might say, is open-ended (albeit that certain options – such as an immortal soul – are precluded). A sequence of Conditioning Factors occurs until Enlightenment as both constructive- and constructed-consciousness. At Enlightenment, constructive-consciousness within the sequence ceases. At final nirvana constructed-consciousness is succeeded by timeless nirvana (which can be seen as a temporal event only from the conditioned, temporal point of view). That which replaces the constructed-consciousness of the sequence, temporally extended and variegated according to different lives, and that which supervenes on the destruction of 'the conceit (that) "I am"', which has prevented all beings in the series from realizing nirvana just as it has provided them with the means of more than simply indexical self-reference, is untraceable, unsayable, beyond designation. One can say that it is

not non-existence, and it is a timeless bliss; to say more would be to rush in where Buddhas fear to tread.

Happiness

Since final nirvana is the cessation of the Aggregates, it is clear that just as there can be no consciousness in that sense, so there can be no Feeling and no determinate Perception or Ideation, and so no happiness in any ordinary sense. At the same time, however, it is said to be a form of happiness, one of a standard list of three: those of mankind, of the gods, and of nirvana. Nirvana is repeatedly said to be the highest happiness. A passage repeated (with some variations) in a number of commentaries cites different canonical phrases to show that *sukha* can be used variously: *inter alia*, it denotes

(i) pleasurable feeling(s);
(ii) the 'root of happiness', as in the phrase 'happy is the arising of Buddhas', or the 'cause of happiness', as in the phrase 'the accumulation of merit is [i.e., brings] happiness'; and
(iii) nirvana, as in the phrase 'nirvana is the highest happiness'.

For these reasons, some translators have chosen different renderings for relevant words in different contexts. The English monk-scholar Ñāṇamoli explains his rendering of *pīti* as 'happiness' (it is often translated as 'rapture') and of *sukha* as 'pleasure' or bliss', when these words are used in the sequence of meditative attainments (*jhāna*-s: see the Appendix to this chapter):

> In loose usage *pıti* (happiness) and *sukha* (pleasure or bliss) are almost synonyms ... The valuable word 'happiness' was chosen for *pıti* rather than the possible alternatives of 'joy' (needed for *somanassa*), 'interest' (which is too flat), 'rapture' (which is overcharged) or 'zest'. For *sukha*, while 'pleasure' seemed to fit admirably where ordinary pleasant feeling is

intended, another, less crass, word seemed necessary for the refined pleas ant feeling of *jhana* and the 'bliss' of *nibbana* … 'Ease' is sometimes used.[2]

In European-American philosophical tradition, the two dominant traditions of thought on this issue stem from Aristotle and the utilitarians. Modern scholars prefer 'flourishing' for Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, since that concept is broader than 'happiness' in ordinary English. Both the defenders and the opponents of utilitarianism have spent much effort in analysing the relationship between (felt) pleasure and one or another ('less crass') notion of happiness.

In the Buddhist case it is possible to mark the distinction between *sukha* as pleasant feeling and *sukha* as a broader evaluative term quite precisely. Ordinary sensual happiness, and the happiness engendered by meditation only up to Level 3, are said to be matters of *feeling*. Both happiness and suffering, as *feelings*, are absent at Level 4. The pleasurable feeling of Level 3 is said to be 'exceedingly sweet, since there is no happiness higher'. This happiness is the highest kind of pleasurable feeling (the Appendix cites some remarkable similes for the physical sensations involved); if there were a Buddhist version of Jeremy Bentham's hedonic calculus, this would be quantitatively the highest point. At Level 4 the meditator's feeling is neither suffering nor happiness. This is not the mere absence of suffering and happiness, but a third type of feeling distinct from them. Nonetheless Level 4 is itself also said to be *sukha*; its main characteristic is equanimity, and it is said to be a form of happiness in so far as it is peaceful. Moreover, even Level 9, the Cessation of Perception/Ideation and Feeling, is also *sukha*. Commentaries explain:

Here from the fourth Level onwards the feeling of neither suffering nor happiness (that occurs) is also said to be happiness in the sense that it is peaceful and sublime. Cessation [the ninth Level] occurs as happiness in that

> it is the kind of happiness which is not a matter of feeling. For happiness that is a matter of feeling (occurs) through the five strands of sense pleasure and through the eight (Meditation Level) attainments [i.e., as a feeling of happi ness in nos. 1 3 and as the peaceful and sublime feeling of neither suffering nor happiness in nos. 4 8]. Cessation is (an example of) happiness that is not a matter of feeling. Whether the happiness be a matter of feeling or not, it is all happiness in that it is taken to be a state of non suffering … [The phrase in the texts] 'happiness exists' means that there exists either the happiness that is a matter of feeling or that which is not a matter of feeling. [The phrase] 'the Tathāgata (the Buddha) assigns this or that to (the category of) "happiness"' means that he assigns to happiness everything which is non suffering.

In any lexicon, terms analogous to English 'happiness' will be applied to more than just experientially tangible kinds of pleasure, bodily and mental. To see how final nirvana – after the cessation of the Aggregates of Feeling and Perception as well as in their temporary absence in the Attainment of Cessation – can be designated *happy*, it might be useful to consider happiness, as non-suffering, in relation to the three types of suffering (unsatisfactoriness) discussed earlier: (i) ordinary suffering; (ii) suffering brought about by change, impermanence; (iii) suffering inherent in the fact of Conditioning:

(i) To ordinary suffering corresponds ordinary happiness, both matters of experience, of feeling, *vedanā* in Pali.

(ii) When texts say that ordinary happiness is suffering, commentaries explain that this is the kind of unsatisfactoriness brought about by change. A monk presents the Buddha with a dilemma: did he not say that there are the three kinds of feeling, but also that whatever is felt is (a case of) suffering? The second statement, he replies, was made in relation to the impermanence of conditioned things; the commentary explains that impermanence here is the fact of death; and there is no suffering greater than (ordinary) death.

(iii) One text says that the first two forms of suffering can be overcome to a certain extent in ordinary life, by good health and old age, but only final nirvana without remainder of attachment can get rid of the suffering inherent in conditioning. In the formula for the memory of past lives, it is said that a person remembers about each life: 'I experienced such-and-such happiness and suffering there'; when the Buddha says this of himself, including his penultimate birth as a god named Setaketu in the Tusita heaven, commentaries explain that he experienced divine happiness there, his only suffering being the unsatisfactoriness inherent in all conditioned things. All conditioned phenomena are empty of happiness, in that they are unsatisfactory because subject to arising and decay. Just as the suffering of impermanence (mostly), and the unsatisfactoriness of Conditioning (wholly), are not descriptive but prescriptive, not depictions of lived experience but evaluations of it from a transcendentalist perspective, so the parallel forms of happiness in nirvana, permanence (= non-duration) and freedom from conditioning, make sense as evaluations but are aporetic when applied to a state to which conditioned, unenlightened beings may aspire.

The two aporias discussed in this section can be simply stated: nirvana is without the Aggregate of consciousness and without any *feeling* of happiness, but to attain it is not to become non-existent, and to accede to the highest bliss. These aporias seem to me to belong in this chapter with the imagery of nirvana, rather than in the previous chapter on the concept of it, because poetic evocation can achieve things that mere silence, in a systematic taxonomy, cannot. To suggest to readers some possibly valuable avenues for further reflecting on this, ways of trying to inhabit a Buddhist

sensibility through Western analogies – but *not* to arrive at any conclusions – I will discuss two perhaps unexpected things in this context: the poet Tennyson, as seen by the scholar Eric Griffiths, and gravestone imagery.

Griffiths, referring also to what he sees as Marcel Proust's 'creative uncertainty about life after death', suggests that philosophy and poetry are differing 'styles in which people think and speak'; concerning 'the moral drama of wishing to die and wishing to survive death' in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, written after the death of his friend Arthur Hallam, he says:

> The life out of which we desire immortality we know only as a life of change, and it's impossible to know how to want another kind of life, cruel though the final change of death may be. These contradictions of desire could induce what Arthur Hallam called 'that mood between contentment and despair, in which suffering appears so associated with existence that we would willingly give up one with the other, and look forward with a sort of hope to that silent void where, if there are no smiles, there are at least no tears, and since the heart cannot beat, it will not ever be broken' … [Tennyson] was susceptible to such moods, particularly in his exceptional feeling for the kinship of immortality to insomnia, of the similarity between living for ever and not ever being able to get to sleep. Perhaps the idea that personal immortality was a form of eternal insomnia came to Tennyson from the way in which it's possible to speak of death as 'rest' or 'sleep'; whatever the reason, he often expressed the dreadfulness of his deepest hopes for survival in the anguished image of being perpetually awake. These contradictions, which bedevil thinking on the matter of immortality, on whether immortality is possible for beings who are in part matter, may be stilled by poetry though they prove an endless riddle for philosophical argument, 'stilled' in the sense of 'calmed' and also 'preserved'.[3]

Much of the context here, of course, is not appropriate; while the somewhat melancholy tone does capture something of the Buddhist feeling for suffering, *dukkha*, in all of its senses, it risks raising the tired Orientalist trope of 'pessimism'. Certainly the Christian

ideological background to Hallam's and Tennyson's ideas about personal immortality is irrelevant; and Griffiths's own concern with the unique ability of poetry, rather than philosophy, to answer to the fluctuating moods and attitudes of embodied human beings to the fact of their mortal embodiment does overlap with my emphasis on imagery and narrative as modes of Buddhist culture, but it is not the same thing. Narrative will occupy Chapters 4 and 5; here I suggest that the imagery of nirvana, as both a response to and an embodiment of the aporias of consciousness and happiness, might be said both to raise and to 'still' – in Griffiths's senses of 'calm' and also 'preserve' – the contradictions of nirvana that prove an endless riddle for philosophical argument.

The second avenue for reflection concerns less conventionally 'poetic' – though not necessarily any less deeply felt – representations of death and what is beyond it: epitaphs and inscriptions on gravestones. Here are some examples, culled at random from recent books on the United States. The general cultural-religious framework, in so far as there is one – death, judgment, heaven or hell, perhaps with an interim stay in purgatory – is tolerably clear, and yet the language used is marvellously various, and marvellously capable of producing meaning precisely through its imprecision. The dead can be present in the grave, with or without the hope of moving elsewhere: e.g., 'Here lies …', 'Asleep in the earth', 'Only sleeping'; or they can be gone from it: e.g., 'Weep not, papa and mama, for me, for I am waiting in Heaven for thee.' 'Budded on earth to bloom in heaven' is perhaps ambiguous between the two. The dead can be already 'At peace' (mode unspecified), or for the moment 'Asleep in Jesus, blessed sleep, from which none wakes to weep', while expectations of 'eternal life' (mode again unspecified) are, of course, legion. On a visit in the mid-1990s to the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington DC, always a striking

experience, I saw a hat placed before the wall, with a single sheet of paper next to it: the hat, it said, had been made by a veteran in honour of his dead comrades; there followed a poem, and the message ended with 'May God rest their souls'. The writer, no Tennyson, seemed not to be highly literate: the hand was poor, with various infelicities of grammar and orthography. In such a case it would be inappropriate, clearly, to suppose that understanding the closing words would require trying to work out exactly what the writer thought, aiming to achieve perfect clarity at the level of systematic thought: what kind of souls are in question? Do they move, wander about, unless God makes them rest? What do they do at rest? Are they awake? Are they happy? And so on. Not only the function, I suggest, but also the meaning of the remark is constituted through the simple image – kinaesthetic as much as visual – of finding rest, and its value lies precisely in its capacity to bring satisfactory closure, obviating questions about the current existence and condition of the war dead. In the case of Buddhist ideology, analogously, I want to suggest that like the veteran's closing hope that his comrades were 'at rest', the meaning of nirvana can be carried by, expressed in, constituted through, and circumscribed by images just as well as, indeed often better than, through concepts. Is there consciousness and/or happiness in nirvana? Well, just as a blazing fire might go out ... This is not an answer on the level of systematic thought; but it is a discursive moment that brings into being the Unsaid, the Unconditioned, and preserves nirvana as a contradiction-stilling enigma.

IMAGERY AND EXPRESSIBILITY

Selfless Persons discussed patterns of imagery that embodied and illustrated personal identity and continuity, and its cessation in

nirvana: *inter alia*, nirvana is (i) the final 'going forth from home to homelessness', no longer building body-houses to live in time; it is (ii) the termination of organic growth, where the planting of seeds and their maturation to fruit (i.e., sequences of cause and effect) no longer take place; and it is (iii) the place where the river of temporality ceases flowing, or where the ocean of time reaches its further shore. Here I will discuss four main images for nirvana: the quenching of fire, the ocean, dry land (= the further shore), and the city of nirvana. First, however, some remarks on the image built into the usual Western term for nirvana in life: 'Enlightenment'.

(En)light(enment)

The words 'Enlightenment' and 'Enlightened' for *bodhi* and *buddha* do not render them exactly. They are from root √*budh*, to be awake, and so 'Awakening' and 'Awakened' would be more faithful to the original; this choice would also avoid confusion with the metaphor behind the European Enlightenment. But these terms are so entrenched in English usage for Buddhism and other Indian religions that it seems pointless to try to change matters, and I am content to use them. Light imagery is, of course, very common in many religious traditions; in Buddhism, with very rare exceptions, it is, characteristically, found in an epistemological rather than ontological sense.

The analogy between ignorance as darkness and wisdom as light is ubiquitous. The word 'nirvana', as has been seen, embodies the image that an enlightened person goes out like a fire; on occasion it is said that, while alive, a Buddha blazes brightly, illuminating the world, like a fire, the sun, stars, or lightning. The previous Buddha, Maṅgala, was particularly striking in this respect:

> Whereas with the other Buddhas their bodily radiance spreads around to the distance of eighty cubits, it was not so for him, for the radiance of that Blessed One remained all the time suffusing the ten thousand world systems. Trees, the earth, mountains, oceans and the like, not excepting cooking pots and so forth, appeared as though covered with a film of gold … The moon, the sun and the other heavenly bodies were not able to shine by their own radiance. The distinction between night and day was not felt. The beings went about their business at all times in the light of the Buddha as they do by day in the light of the sun … When he passed away in Nibbāna having remained on earth for ninety thousand years all the ten thousand world spheres became a mass of darkness at one blow. There was great weeping and lamentation among the inhabitants of all the world spheres.

If the world is brightened by a Buddha's presence, and darkened by his nirvanizing, what of nirvana itself: is it light or dark? I have so far come across only two places where light is mentioned ontologically in relation to nirvana rather than epistemologically to the person who, or knowledge that, realizes it. These are both from the *Udāna* and its commentary. At one place, the monk Bāhiya is killed by a calf, and his body burned; when asked what is his destiny, the Buddha replies simply that he is nirvanized, and describes a place 'where there is no water, earth, fire nor air; no stars shine there, nor sun nor moon, and darkness is not found'. The commentary states that the last phrase is added in case someone should think that nirvana was permanently dark; but there is no darkness in nirvana because no matter exists there. What this means is spelled out in the commentary to the first of the four Spirited Utterances at *Udāna* 80, discussed in Chapter 2, which describes the 'sphere' (*āyatana*) 'where there is no earth, no heat, and no wind … neither moon nor sun'. It explains that the reason why moon and sun are not found in nirvana is that darkness can exist only where there are physical forms, and so moon and sun exist in order to dispel the darkness. But there is no physical existence in nirvana, and so no

need for moon and sun. 'In this way (the Buddha) teaches that the individual nature of this same nirvana is light.'

The imagery of light is widespread enough to make the slight mistranslation of *bodhi* and *buddha* as 'Enlightenment' and 'Enlightened' admissible. But the image is not found in the original words, and likewise, although the pattern of light imagery is common, it is not built into the very structure of the Buddhist worldview and the terms of art used within it, as is, for example, the imagery of quenched fire in the words *nirvāṇa/nibbāna*.

The quenching of fire, the setting of the sun

When a questioner asks the Buddha first whether the saint after death is conscious, and then whether he exists, he replies:

> Just as a flame put out by a gust of wind
> goes down and is beyond reckoning,
> so the sage free from name and form
> goes down and is beyond reckoning…
> There is no measuring of one who has gone down,
> there is nothing by which he might be discussed;
> when all attributes (*dhamma*) are removed
> so have all ways of speaking been removed.

Nirvana, the quenching of fire, is an irreducible image, a fundamental semantic device without which Buddhism in its historical expression would be impossible, quite literally unthinkable. Buddhist fire-imagery has always been familiar in the West, both before and after T. S. Eliot chose 'The Fire Sermon' as the title for a section of *The Waste Land*. The translation to which Eliot referred in an endnote reads:

> All things, O priests [better: monks] are on fire. And what, O priests, are all these things which are on fire?

> The eye … forms [seen by the eye] … eye consciousness are on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impres sions received by the eye, that is also on fire.
>
> And with what are these on fire?
>
> With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation [better: delusion]; with birth, old age, death, sorrow, lamenta tion, misery, grief, and despair are they on fire.[4]

The *Sutta* then says the same thing with regard to the other five senses (including mind), to their objects, and to the experiences to which they give rise. Enlightenment is attained by turning away from sense-experience, so that the three fires in the six senses, their objects and resultant sense-consciousnesses, go out. *Selfless Persons* argued that Buddhism deliberately reverses the central fire-image of Brahmanism, derived from the Vedic fire sacrifice. There the fire of the inner self (*ātman*), manifested as the warmth of life, is identical to that of the universe (*brahman*), manifested as the sun and operative in the ripening of plants. According to another image, individual selves are sparks from the fire of *brahman*. Both traditions centred their imaginaire around the imagery of fire, but in Brahmanism fire is an image for what is good and desirable, whereas in Buddhism the reverse is true.

In the Fire Sermon, fire expresses the omnipresence of suffering. Elsewhere, as in two conversations between the Buddha and the ascetic Vacchagotta, the image is applied directly to rebirth and release. In the first the Buddha says that he does not describe an enlightened person who has died as having been reborn in this or that place; rather, such a Supreme Person has made an end of suffering. 'Just as a fire, Vaccha, burns with fuel but not without fuel, so I declare (that there is) a (place of) rebirth for one who is with attachment, but not for one without' (*upādāna* is used both for 'fuel' and 'attachment'). The fuel for rebirth, of course, is Craving.

In the second conversation, the Discourse to Vacchagotta on Fire, the Buddha explains that in the case of an enlightened person none of four possible alternatives applies, or is fitting: one cannot say that he or she is reborn (*upapajjati*), is not reborn, both is and is not reborn, or neither is nor is not reborn. This parallels the standard Unanswered Questions about the enlightened person after death: one cannot say that he or she (i) is, (ii) is not, (iii) both is and is not, (iv) neither is nor is not. Vacchagotta confesses himself bewildered, and the Buddha explains:

> [The Buddha] If a fire were burning in front of you, would you know [that this was so]? [Vacchagotta says yes.] If someone were to ask you 'depending on what is this fire in front of you burning?,' how would you reply?
>
> [Vacchagotta] [That] this fire burning in front of me burns because of its fuel of grass and sticks.
>
> [The Buddha] If this fire in front of you were to go out, would you know [that this was so]? [Again he says yes.] If someone were to ask you 'this quenched fire [which was] in front of you, in which direction has it gone from here east, west, north or south?', how would you reply?
>
> [Vacchagotta] (The question) is not appropriate (*na upeti*), Gotama, sir. The fire burnt because of its fuel of grass and sticks; since that (fuel) is exhausted and no other has been supplied, the fire is without fuel and so is designated 'quenched'.

The Buddha then applies the same reasoning to the enlightened person: it is for this reason that he or she is freed from being designated by the Aggregates and to ask where he or she is inappropriate.

This pattern of imagery led some early scholars to infer a specific doctrinal position, via an analogy with what they take to be early Indian scientific ideas about fire. I will look into this briefly, not for the post-Orientalist pleasure of making our ancestors and predecessors look foolish, but to make an interpretive point. Otto Schrader was perhaps the first to express the idea, in 1905. For

him 'the common Indian view is, since the oldest time [*sic*], that an expiring flame does not really go out, but returns into the primitive, pure, invisible state of fire it had before its appearance as visible fire.'[5] Erich Frauwallner's espousal of the view (in 1953, English translation 1973) has been influential. He wrote that 'the flaming up and extinction of fire means for the Indian of the ancient times not the origination and destruction of fire but that the already existing fire is therethrough visible and becomes again invisible'.[6]

Insofar as it is an attempt to construe the aporias of nirvana, as do Buddhists, as not implying that after an enlightened person nirvanizes there is nothing, such an analysis might be commended. But it must be rejected, for two main reasons. First, the texts Schrader and Frauwallner cite are, with one exception, Brahmanical, and all are later than the earliest Buddhist texts: to argue that they represent the 'ancient Indian' view in its entirety simply begs the question of whether Buddhism shared that view (in the logical sense of *petitio principii*: assuming the truth of what the argument is supposed to establish). It seems to me more likely that the Brahmanical texts were trying to rationalize, according to their own understanding, the dramatic and quite un-Brahmanical fire-image that the success of Buddhism had made popular. This is, perhaps, debatable; but the second reason is decisive. In the majority of uses of fire-imagery in Buddhist texts, the fires that go out or go down like the sun, are – like the three fires of Greed, Hatred, and Delusion – precisely what must be *wholly* eliminated for release to be possible. If these fires simply returned to their 'primitive, pure, invisible' state, then, according to Buddhist logic and psychology, their invisible existence and potential reappearance would make release impossible.

To concretize the fire-image into a conceptually specific doctrine as do Schrader and Frauwallner is an example of what I have described as filling Buddhist silences, interpreting and then

vocalizing their meaning. Scholars who do this often have their own account of what Buddhism must really mean, one that is divergent from the discourse of Buddhism itself. Schrader states confidently that

> without any doubt the question of the Parinibbānaṃ is, although not identical with, yet dependent on the question of the *atta* or substance, so that, if it were certain that the Buddha declined the idea of a substance in every sense, the answer concerning the Parinibbānaṃ would of course be that it was annihilation in every respect … I cannot explain here the reasons why, to my way of thinking, philosophy is forced to accept the metaphysical conception of the Absolute One … I only state that the Absolute One, in its very sense, as also, for instance, in the sense of Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 7.2, is something without and beyond the three Avacaras [spheres of existence] of Buddhism, and therefore not touched by the doctrine of *anatta*.[7]

Thus he concludes from his own philosophy that Buddhism must agree with him. E. J. Thomas, a generation later, remarks of Schrader tartly that 'with such premises much can be proved'.[8] Schrader's view is easy to express: had the redactors of the early texts understood the fire-image in this way, they could very easily have said so. Since they did not, as interpreters we should accept that fact and ask, rather: what does this imagery achieve *as it is*? The answer, I suggest, is that it is an imaginative embodiment of the manner in which what can be said about nirvana as a concept ends in a silence. The dynamic of the quenching of a fire, or the setting of the sun, and of the associated idea of 'cooling', depicts with perfect clarity a movement from activity and suffering to rest and peace, while deliberately withholding focus on the aftermath. The image does not solve the aporia; it states it.

Ocean-deep, unfathomable

One image that does apply to the aftermath is that of the ocean. In the Discourse to Vacchagotta on Fire, immediately after the

exchange cited above, the Buddha says that the enlightened person after death is 'profound, immeasurable, unfathomable like the great ocean'. Earlier in the conversation, as cited earlier, the four alternatives ('is reborn', 'is not reborn', both, or neither) had all been rejected as inapplicable to the nirvanized saint. The ocean image should not be concretized into the doctrine that the individual self is merged into universal being, like a river into the ocean. As an autonomous image, to say that an enlightened saint after death is 'immeasurable, unfathomable like the great ocean', is to evoke, again with perfect clarity, the sense in which an enlightened saint nirvanizes, and thereafter cannot be described either as existing or as not existing, but only as 'untraceable'. The clarity of such an image is not, indeed, conceptual clarity; but since the doctrine asserts that none of the available conceptual possibilities is appropriate for the situation, the image says as much as can be said.

Oceanic imagery of this kind fits into a wider pattern: just as streams move towards the ocean, so practising the Path moves towards the ocean of nirvana (*nibbāna-sāgara*); the ocean and nirvana share various qualities, among which are the facts of not being filled by the rivers that, and the people who, flow into them. In the compound *nibbānogadha*, if *ogadha* does mean 'plunging into' as the commentarial tradition maintains, the image is clearly one of deep water; *amatogadha*, plunging into the deathless, is common, and *amatantala*, the pool or lake of the deathless, is also found.

Land, safe from the sea of time (the further shore)

A nirvanized saint after death is ocean deep; but nirvana is also, very commonly, the escape from the ocean, river, or stream of rebirth and consciousness, the haven of the further shore. This is one of the most widespread images for the goal of religions

worldwide. In Pali it is latent in the word *parama*, found in these senses already in Vedic Sanskrit, which means literally 'farthest', but standardly used in a (non-metaphorical sense) as 'best', and so as an epithet of nirvana. *Parama* is a superlative from *para*, 'beyond, on the further side of', or simply 'other'. The word is found often in imagery with *tīra*, 'bank, shore'; it is also subsumed into the derivative *pāramī*, 'Perfection' (all Buddhas fulfil a list of ten such Perfections, during many lifetimes, in the process of achieving Enlightenment), and occurs in a number of adjectives (*pāra*, *pāra-gata*, etc.) referring to an enlightened person. The image occurs in many texts; one example is in an extended simile from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*: a man is in danger from four venomous snakes, five murderous enemies, and a burglar with a sword; he finds an empty village, but is told that it is about to be plundered by robbers. He sees a great stretch of water, and finds that 'this shore is (full of) uncertainties and fears, the further shore safe and without fear', but can see no boat or bridge to take him across. He makes a raft and crosses over. The simile is explained: the four snakes are the four Great (material) Elements: earth, water, fire, and air; the five enemies are the Five Aggregates; the burglar is passion and lust; the empty village is a name for the six internal Sense-Bases; the robbers are the objects of sense, the six external Sense-Bases; the great stretch of water is 'the four floods of pleasure, (repeated) existence, (wrong, harmful) views, and ignorance; this shore is the psycho-physical individual; the further shore, safe and without fear, is nirvana; the raft is the Path.'

Such land could also be an island. 'Tell me, sir,' the Buddha is asked, 'of an island for those who are overcome by old age and death, (like those) standing in the middle of a lake when a very fearful flood has arisen.' 'This island', he replies, 'without possessions, without grasping, matchless, I call it "quenching" [*nibbāna*], the complete

destruction of old age and death.' The refuge of nirvana is firm, high, dry land: 'I was able to bring myself up from water to land,' says the monk Ajjuna, and the commentary explains that the water is the great flood of *saṃsāra*, and the land nirvana. The word *thala*, from the root √*sthā*, 'to stand (firm)', is often found with the image of arriving at the further shore (= nirvana). The ground of nirvana is also smooth and pleasant; it is 'the unwavering place', and offers 'unwavering happiness'. Unlike the unstable, fearful ocean of rebirth, nirvana is 'without fear from any quarter'.

The city of nirvana

In many texts, as in those on 'the unwavering' just cited, words are used of nirvana that suggest that it is a place or has spatial location (*pada*, *āyatana*, *thāṇa*). The epithet *sugata*, 'one who is in a (particularly) good way', or 'one who has fared well', is standardly explained as meaning *sundaraṃ thāṇaṃ gacchati*, 'he goes/has gone to a good (beautiful) place', which thus provides a verbal parallel to the term *utopia* in Thomas More's punning title. Doctrinally, to the question where, literally, the Good-place, *eu-topia*, of nirvana is, the only possible reply is that it is only metaphorically a place, really it is No-place, *ou-topia*. But the image of nirvana as a city, although not found explicitly in any canonical text, becomes entirely commonplace in the later literature, with or without detailed elaboration. It does seems to be, as the commentary thinks, implicit in a *Sutta* entitled 'City' in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*. It is in the Collection of Texts about Causation, and the content of the Buddha's Enlightenment is given as the chain of Dependent Origination. Thus, he concludes, 'vision arose, understanding arose, cognizance arose, knowledge arose, light arose'; and he adds a simile:

(It is) just as if a person, wandering through the jungle forest, were to see an ancient road, an old straight path travelled by men of former times, and were to go along it; (and) as he went along he were to see an ancient town, an old royal city inhabited by men of former times, with parks, groves, ponds and walls (a) delightful (place). [The man sends news of his find to the king, suggesting that he rebuild the city.] And (then) the king or the king's minister were to rebuild the city; and after some time that city were to thrive and increase, become rich, prosperous, and crowded with people.

In the text the Buddha only gives an explanation of the old road: it is the Noble Eight-fold Path, 'travelled by Perfectly Enlightened Ones of former times'. The commentary explains: the man's wandering in the forest is the time spent by the Gotama in past lives fulfilling the Perfections after vowing to become a Buddha at the time of Dīpaṅkara Buddha; the road is the Path; and the city is the city of nirvana. Whereas the simile, it continues, speaks of an external city that one person saw but another rebuilt and made habitable, in the Buddha's case the same Teacher both saw the city and made it habitable. It goes on to make more specific analogies between elements of the city and elements of Buddhist practice (it has four doors, which are the four stages of the Path, and so on).

Elsewhere, commentaries explain other similes in a comparable way. Another *Sutta* in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* contains a simile of a king's border-town, with six doors, to which messengers come with a message for the lord of the town. In the text the border-town is said to be the body, the six doors the six senses, and the lord of the town consciousness. The commentary takes things further: the lord of the border-town is a dissolute son of the king of a prosperous great city, who must be reminded of his royal task. The prosperous great city is the city of nirvana, the king the Buddha, the border-town the psycho-physical individual, and the dissolute son the mind of a monk in need of training. The Discourse on Relays by Chariot in the *Majjhima Nikāya* describes

a sequence of purifications, and states that the religious life is led not for the sake of any of them, but for the sake of final nirvana: the sequence is likened to seven relays by chariot, which take King Pasenadi from his palace in the city of Sāvatthi to that in Sāketa. For the commentary, Pasenadi is the practitioner afraid of old age and death, Sāvatthi is the city of the psycho-physical individual, and Sāketa the city of nirvana. Just as on arrival at Sāketa the king enters the palace and enjoys food and drink, surrounded by his family and friends, so the practitioner enters the palace of *Dhamma* and, while seated on the couch of Cessation, surrounded by his good qualities, enjoys the supermundane happiness of the fruits of the Path. Arahants are said to enjoy the same happiness by commentaries to texts which describe the enlightened person, *inter alia*, as one who has 'lifted the crossbar, filled in the moat, (and) put down the flag': it is as if there were two cities, one a city of robbers (the psycho-physical individual), the other a safe city; a great warrior (the practitioner) thinks that the safe city will never be free from fear while the city of robbers stands, and so decides to destroy it. He takes his armour (of morality) and sword (of wisdom), goes to the robber-city, and attacks it; he cuts down with his sword the pillars set up at the city-gate (uproots desire with the path of Arahantship), lifts the crossbar (of ignorance), fills in the moat (of rebirth), pulls down its flag (of conceit), and sets fire to it before entering the safe city of nirvana.

Other images: health, freedom; and image-lists

The English concept of salvation, from Latin *salus/salvus*, is at least in its etymology connected with ideas of safety, freedom from harm, and health. The Buddhist concept of *dukkha* refers to all

sorts of ills, and nirvana is of course freedom from all of them. Words like *roga* and *agha*, which can mean disease in the literal sense (not just dis-ease in the general sense of *dukkha* as unsatisfactoriness), appear frequently in descriptions of the suffering of rebirth: the arising of the Aggregates is the arising of *dukkha*, of diseases and of old age and death; 'I teach disease and the root of disease … [The Aggregates are] disease … The root of disease is desire.' The Four Noble Truths have often been said to be based on an existing medical model: the disease, its aetiology, prognosis for recovery, and medicine. This was not the case, or at least there is no evidence for such a scheme at the time of the Buddha; but the analogy of medicine is common. There are two kinds of disease, the Buddha says: physical and mental; some people can be free from physical disease for up to fifty years, but apart from the enlightened, rare are those who are free from mental disease even for a moment; he encourages an old man who is physically ill to train himself in the thought that although his body may be sick, his mind need not be. Arahants may be sick in body but not in mind. The Buddha is like a doctor; in the City of *Dhamma* he has a medicine stall and a pharmacy, where his medicines are the Four Noble Truths, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, etc. Nirvana has three qualities of a medicine: it is a refuge (or help) for those who are afflicted with the poison of the defilements, it brings an end to all (forms of) *dukkha* (as medicine to disease, *roga*), and it is nectar (*amata*, 'the deathless').

To reach nirvana is to become free from rebirth, so terms such as *mokkha* and *vimokkha*, from the root √*mu*(*ñ*)*c*, 'to be free(d) or released', are ubiquitous, as are synonyms, in Pali and in all South and Southeast Asian religious texts. Nirvana affords release from the prison of conditioned existence. Playing – creatively etymologizing – on the word *nirodha*, 'cessation', in the Third Noble Truth,

it is said that '*ni* signifies absence, *rodha* means a prison; therefore because it is empty of all (rebirth) destinies, there is (in nirvana) no confinement by suffering, which is called the prison of *saṃsāra*'.

Some texts juxtapose different images, as in the Discourse to Vacchagotta on Fire, discussed earlier. The *Visuddhimagga*, described by Ñāṇamoli, its translator, as 'a detailed manual for meditation masters and a work of reference', occasionally offers lists of similes (presumably for the use of teachers and exegetes). In one place, three similes for the Aggregates are juxtaposed, from which one can draw inferences about nirvana in two cases (see Table 3.1). Nirvana, accordingly, is like regaining health and escaping from prison.

In another text it is said that the Four Truths can be illustrated in many different ways (see Table 3.2). In a section describing different kinds of knowledge, a list of twelve similes is given, of which the last six are relevant here:

Just as a man faint with hunger and famished longs for delicious tasting food, so too the meditator famished with the hunger of the round of rebirths longs for the food consisting of mindfulness occupied with the body, which tastes of the deathless [or 'nectar', *amata*].

Just as a thirsty man whose throat and mouth are parched longs for a drink with many ingredients, so too the meditator who is parched with the thirst of the round of rebirth longs for the noble drink of the Eight fold Path.

Table 3.1

The Body is:	a sick room	a prison
Feeling is:	the sickness	punishment
Perception/Ideation is:	the cause of sickness	the offence
Conditioning Factors are:	bad food, which provoked the sickness	the punisher
Consciousness is:	the sick man	the offender

Table 3.2

Dukkha	Origin of *dukkha*	Cessation (= nirvana)	The Path
a burden	taking up the burden	putting down the burden	the means to put down the burden
disease	cause of disease	curing the disease	medicine
famine	drought	abundance of food	adequate rain
enmity	cause of enmity	removal of enmity	means to remove enmity
a poison tree	the tree's root	cutting the root	means to cut the root
fear	cause of fear	freedom from fear	means to attain freedom from fear
this shore	the great flood	the further shore	effort to reach the further shore

Just as a man frozen by cold longs for heat, so too this meditator frozen by the cold of craving and (selfish) affection in the round of rebirths longs for the fire of the path that burns up the defilements.

Just as a man faint with heat longs for cold, so too this meditator scorched by the burning of the eleven fires [= those of passions, hatred … and despair given in the Fire Sermon, cited above] longs for *nibbāna* [their quenching].

Just as a man smothered in darkness longs for light, so too this meditator wrapped and enveloped in the darkness of ignorance longs for the light of knowledge consisting in path development.

Just as a man sick with poison longs for an antidote [to get rid of the poison], so too this meditator sick with the poison of defilement longs for *nibbana*, the deathless [or: ambrosial] medicine that destroys the poison of defilement.

The Questions of Milinda (*Milinda-pañha*) also contains a large variety of images, sometimes organized into lists. King Milinda asks if there is a quality or attribute of nirvana found in other things, something that might merely illustrate it by means of a simile. Nāgasena replies that in regard to its true or essential nature (*sarūpato*) there is not, but there is in regard to its qualities or

attributes. He then lists one attribute of a lotus, two of water, three of a medicine, four of the great ocean, five of food, ten of space, three of a precious jewel, three of red sandal-wood, three of cream of ghee, and five of a mountain-peak.

The Conclusion returns to the importance of imagery in the Pali imaginaire, and its relation to both systematic and narrative thought. For that discussion, it will be necessary to retain from the present discussion only the two most important images: quenched fire, and the city of nirvana. In the closing pages of this chapter, where multiple images have tumbled thick and fast on top of one another, the reader may well feel exasperated: do all these images make it easier to think nirvana, or more difficult? But that too might be an aporia that Buddhist texts would be content to leave unsolved.

APPENDIX: HAPPINESS IN MEDITATION

In the translation by Ñāṇamoli given above, the word *pīti* is rendered 'happiness', while *sukha* is 'pleasure' or 'bliss'. His reasons for doing so will be clear from Table 3.3 and from the accounts of the two Pali terms given here. However, both because the word 'happiness' has more philosophical resonance in English, and because the sensations of *pīti* as described below seem rather stronger than the word 'happiness' might suggest, I prefer to render them as 'rapture' and 'happiness' respectively. The details of Levels 5–9 are not relevant here. The remarks below are mostly drawn directly from Buddhist texts, notably the *Visuddhimagga*. There are some complexities in the Buddhist view of what constitutes 'mind' and/or 'body' here, which I pass over. The English-language terms are meant to be general equivalents.

When a person in the preparatory stages of meditation realizes that [the] five Hindrances are destroyed, delight (*pāmujja*) arises in him (I use the unmarked masculine for both genders), (and) a

Table 3.3

Meditation Level	characterized by
9. Attainment of Cessation	Happiness = Non suffering (*sukha* as opposed to *dukkha*)
8. Neither Perception nor Non Perception	Happiness = Non suffering (*sukha* as opposed to *dukkha*)
7. Nothingness	Happiness = Non suffering (*sukha* as opposed to *dukkha*)
6. Infinite Consciousness	Happiness = Non suffering (*sukha* as opposed to *dukkha*)
5. Infinite Space	Happiness = Non suffering (*sukha* as opposed to *dukkha*)
4. (no name)	Happiness (as a feature of equanimity, as an unconscious state or disposition)
3. (no name)	Happiness (of the body)
2. (no name)	Rapture, Happiness
1. (no name)	Applied and Sustained Thought, Rapture, Happiness

gentle kind of Rapture (*taruṇa-pīti*) makes his whole body tremble with thrills of pleasure. As his mind is enraptured, his body is soothed; as his body is soothed he experiences Happiness; and as he experiences Happiness his mind becomes concentrated. Then, detached from (pleasures based on) desires and from unwholesome states of mind, he enters into and remains in Level 1, which is characterized by Applied and Sustained Thought, by Rapture, and by Happiness. He drenches, saturates, fills, and pervades his body with the Rapture and Happiness arising from detachment, and there is no part of his body whatsoever that is not pervaded by this Rapture and Happiness. Just as a skilled bathman or his apprentice might gradually sprinkle water on bath-powder in a metal dish and knead it, so that the powder, in a lump, becomes completely filled with moisture within and without, (but) no moisture drips out, so in

just the same way the meditator drenches, saturates, fills, and pervades his body with the Rapture and Happiness arising from detachment, and there is no part of his body whatsoever that is not pervaded by this Rapture and Happiness. Rapture here can be of five kinds: the minor, which is merely capable of making the hairs on one's body stand on end; the momentary, like flashes of lightning at different moments; the streaming, which breaks [into streams] whenever it streams down the body, in the same way as a wave breaks on a beach; the exciting or uplifting, which can literally lift the body up into the air; and the suffusing or pervading, which fills the body like a bag filled by blowing (air into it) or a rock-cave inundated with water.

On Level 2, he attains a unity of mind without applied and sustained thought, but Rapture and Happiness remain. The feeling of Rapture and Happiness over the whole body is of the same kind as that of Level 1, but here it is compared to an enclosed lake pervaded by the cool waters of an underground spring. According to a modern Burmese practitioner of meditation,

> There is a tingling sensation in every part of the body, much more pleasurable than any sexual experience, including orgasm. In orgasm, the pleasure is restricted to one organ, whereas this meditation pleasure suffuses the entire body; it is felt in all of one's organs.[9]

The anthropologist who cites this report also refers to a psychoanalytic paper on Buddhist meditation that speaks here of 'a pleasure completely freed from the genitals, an orgasm diffused through the whole body'. Although, for me, psychoanalysis is not a science but a form of mythology (albeit for some people not without its therapeutic uses, like any mythology), I mention the comparison because a distinction made by Freud helps bring out the nature of *pīti*, Rapture, in this context. He coined the term 'polymorphous

perversity' for what he saw as children's sensuality; that is, the child's alleged capacity to experience sensual pleasure in every part of its body, which precedes the localization of pleasure onto the genitals and the reproductive-sexual act. Such pleasure appears in a significant episode in the Buddha's biography. After renouncing the lay life, and practising extreme self-mortificatory asceticism without finding what he was seeking, he remembered a time when, as a child under a tree while his father was ploughing, he attained Meditation Level 1. The memory stirred in him the reflection that 'I am not afraid of that Happiness that is free from (pleasure based on) desires and unwholesome states of mind'. He decided to eat moderately, and so evolved the Middle Way between asceticism and sense pleasure, which led to his Enlightenment, and became one of Buddhism's main names for itself.

On Level 3, 'because of the lack of attachment to (or: passion for) Rapture' (*pitīyā ca virāgā*), the meditator no longer experiences it, but only Happiness of the body, along with equanimity and mindfulness. The body's being pervaded by this Happiness is like lotus flowers growing in water and drawing nourishment from it, with its moisture suffusing them from root to tip. Were the meditator not to remain vigilant, however, this Happiness of Level 3 would revert to Rapture and become again associated with it (i.e., he would fall back to Level 2), just as an unguarded suckling calf taken away from its mother will always return to her. 'Beings are [normally] passionate about (are attached to, *sārajjanti*; have *rāga* for) Happiness, and this Happiness [of Level 3] is exceedingly sweet; there is no Happiness higher than this. But here [that is, when the meditator successfully remains at this Level] there is no passion for Happiness, thanks to the power of mindfulness and full-awareness.' Rapture, unlike Happiness, is characterized by cheerfulness (a word that elsewhere denotes

smiling or laughing) and gladness (*pahāsa-odagya*). A mind in a state of such Rapture on Level 2 is called gross, in so far as it is characterized by elation (*uppilāvitatta*), and so the meditator passes to Level 3, wishing to avoid such grossness. In the Happiness of Level 3 the only such element of grossness is the fact that one pays attention to one's Happiness; so the meditator abandons this and passes on to Level 4.

The relationship between Rapture and Happiness in Levels 1–3 is quite precisely defined, at least in terms of lexical categories. 'Where there is Rapture there is Happiness, but where there is Happiness there is not necessarily Rapture.' The presence of Rapture requires that a person feel attached to, or passion for, Happiness; in the absence of this passion, as in Level 3, Happiness remains alone. Because of the active presence in it of attachment/passion, Rapture is included in the Aggregate of Mental Formations, whereas Happiness is classed in that of Feeling. Rapture can be compared to a man in a desert wilderness seeing or hearing water at the edge of a forest, and going towards it in a state of eagerness and delight (*hattha-pahattha*); Happiness is like his drinking the water and enjoying the forest shade.

In passing to Level 4 and above, the meditator first abandons joy and sorrow (*somanassa*, *domanassa*, literally 'good-' and 'bad-mindedness'), then (explicit) Happiness and suffering (*sukha*, *dukkha*) (the two pairs are classed as mental and physical, respectively), and attains a state of equanimity, mindfulness, and purity. The feeling here is called 'without Happiness or suffering', not simply because these qualities are absent, but as a third, independent category. The meditator suffuses his whole body with mental purity and cleanliness, like someone sitting down in a clean white robe, the robe touching every part of his body. Two texts commenting on the simile say that the Happiness of Equanimity here

consists in 'being suffused with (a sense of) refreshment' (*utu-pharaṇa*). The experience of this Level cannot be called 'happiness' in an ordinary sense; but since it is less gross, more subtle than the lower Levels, it can be evaluated as a kind of happiness. The same thing is true of Happiness in the five higher Levels, 5–9.

CHAPTER 4

Nirvana, time, and narrative

THE MYTH OF 'THE MYTH OF THE ETERNAL RETURN'

The last few decades have seen an explosion of scholarly interest in narrative, as a mode of discourse in fiction, historiography, law, medicine, and elsewhere, and of self-perception in psychoanalysis, autobiography, and experience in general. Narrative is a textual/cultural form, and a cognitive process. Part of this interest has focused on time, which is obviously and intimately involved in the special form of representation constituted by narrative. Unfortunately, when writing about time, calendars, and so forth, cross-culturally, few scholars seem able to avoid some version of the Myth of the Eternal Return. The most important premodern source of this is Augustine, who was quite happy, famously, to confess himself incapable of saying what time is – 'What then is time? If no-one asks me, I know, if I want to explain it to someone who asks, I do not know'– and at the same time to berate 'pagans', notably Greeks, for having a mistaken cyclical view of it, a characterization of Greek thought shown now by many scholars clearly to be wrong, in historiography and in a wide range of philosophical, literary, scientific, and other fields. In the modern scholarly world, much though not all of the responsibility for the Myth of the Eternal Return must lie with Mircea Eliade, who, as in his influential book of that title, lumped together pagans, primitives, Archaic Man (*sic*, for both

words), the civilizations of 'the East', notably Indian Brahmanical religion, and more besides, into the single category of 'the traditional', opposed to modern, that is Western, Historical Man.[1] The fact that this was more often than not to praise the former and criticize the latter is irrelevant to the point that this dichotomy makes serious culturally and historically differentiated thought about these issues well-nigh impossible, in Europe as much as anywhere else. Even if one restricts his grand claims to Southern Asia, they are still hopelessly over-generalized. His descriptions of 'Indian' thought rely for the most part on the liturgical texts of early Brahmanical sacrificial ritual, in the description of which his vocabulary can be useful. This is hardly surprising: all liturgies are for the most part invariant performance texts; and the ideology of such Brahmanical ritual was cosmogonic, claiming to regenerate the universe by revivifying the creative energy of the primordial sacrifice (through macro- and micro-cosmic parallels). Given the absence in Buddhism of any myth or metaphysics of cosmogony (and a corresponding absence of any end to collective time, on which see below), the notion of a special time-outside-time, *illud tempus*, as the beginning and ending condition of the cosmos, periodically recaptured in the 'sacred time' of ritual, is at best irrelevant.

The widespread emphasis recently within the academy on the notion that knowledge is historically and culturally located has led many writers to use the qualifying adjective 'Western' in relation to what they are writing about. This usage, when it is well intentioned, may seem harmless, but there is a crucial slippage of meaning inherent in it, from (i) the sense of the qualifier as simply descriptive of European-American tradition in some domain, without prejudice as to what may be true of other traditions, to (ii) the exclusivist sense of 'Western and not other'. The ambiguity can be seen in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's textbook on *Narrative Fiction:*

Contemporary Poetics, published in 1983. In the chapter on time, the author states on the first page – as is surely true – that 'time is one of the most basic categories of human experience'; but on the next page we are told that 'our civilization tends to think of time as an uni-directional and irreversible flow, a sort of one-way street. Such a conception was given metaphoric shape by Heraclitus early in western history: "You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters and yet other waters go ever flowing on."'[2] (The next chapter will cite an exactly parallel phrase, used – repeatedly – in the Chronicle of Buddhas, *Buddhavaṃsa*.) It is not clear whether the author restricts her remarks to 'our (Western) civilization' because she does not know whether or not they apply anywhere else, which is perfectly reasonable, or whether the implication is that the non-West has some other way of thinking about time than as uni-directional and irreversible. If so, this would be difficult to harmonize with the generalizing remark on the first page –for now we would have time as basic to (all) human experience but differentiated between West and Rest – and contrary to another general remark she makes a few sentences after the last passage cited, and which also seems to me surely true, that time is 'repetition within irreversible sequence'.[3]

It is important to state clearly here that my argument is not against the use of the dichotomy between linear and cyclical time as a means of analysis: on the contrary, the complementary opposition between non-repetitive and repetitive time informs the whole account of nirvana, time and narrative to be given in this chapter and the next. The argument is against the use of it as a form of cultural description and differentiation. Barbara Adam offers an excellent and thorough critique of those who identify time with 'historical, chronological dating' and so see non-modern (i.e., non-Western) societies as having a 'cyclical' view of it. As she puts it:

> It is essential to appreciate that all social processes display aspects of linearity and cyclicality, [and] that we recognize a cyclical structure when we focus on events that repeat themselves and unidirectional linearity when our attention is on the process of the repeating action …
>
> Our idea of time must consequently always entail both rhythmic recurrence and beginnings and ends, perimeters and horizons. It is therefore important that we never lose sight of one whilst our focus is on the other. Rhythms and irreversible processes must be understood *together* since, on their own, neither could account for that which is expressed by the idea of time.[4]

This is true for any society or individual, at any time. All human experience of time always involves both repetition and non-repetition. However much any particular tradition of representation may privilege, or seem to privilege, one or the other, in fact they imply each other, such that both will always and everywhere coexist, to varying degrees. This is a human universal based, in part, on biological facts about human bodies; circadian and other rhythms establish repetitiveness and cyclicality, while the process of growth, maturation, aging, and death establishes non-repetitiveness and linearity. Both cyclicality and linearity are ubiquitous and obvious features of societies also.

A particularly strong version of the dichotomy is found in an influential article by the anthropologist Edmund Leach, 'Two Essays concerning the Symbolic Representation of Time'. He thinks that 'our modern English notion of time embraces at least two different kinds of experience that are logically distinct and even contradictory'. These two 'kinds of experience' are of repetition – metronomes, clocks, pulses, seasons – and non-repetition – the process of living, growing old, and dying. Religions, he says, 'purport to repudiate the reality of death' by subsuming non-repetition into repetition, such that death becomes a process of new birth; indeed, he says, were it not for 'religious prejudice' the two aspects of time would not be embraced under one category at all.[5] The first point about religions

seems to me sometimes true, although not so for Buddhism, in which *memento mori* is probably the single most common motif. The second is completely wrong; the perception of repetition and of non-repetition logically imply each other. It is only through the continuous and connected experience of a single, irreversible trajectory through time that it is possible to recognize events as *repetitions* at all: for example, by setting the recurrence of the seasons against the non-repetitive course of one's own life. And it is the constant repetition of objective phenomena set against subjective change that makes the irreversibility of aging the vivid individual experience that it is. In moving through an irreversible sequence of life-experiences, one can both perceive that sequence as the repetition or recurrence of roles and patterns of interrelationship – son/daughter → parent → grandparent, child → youth → adult, student → teacher, and so on – and recognize that one's own instantiation of them, in the empirical perspective of one lifetime, is once and for all. As a general matter of conceptualization and cognition, it seems to me obvious and natural to class together both what happens for the first time, uniquely, and what happens repeatedly, in the overall category of *event*. Time is that in which events occur; or, one might say, in order to avoid unnecessary reification, the human activity of timing is a way to systematize event-changes, and the question of whether it is more salient to represent a given instance as unique (as all events necessarily are, from the non-repetitive perspective) or as the instantiation of a pattern is an issue logically secondary to the fundamental activity of timing.

'Other cultures' do not have another, deeply 'other' way of existing in time. The language used to express time-relations will no doubt often be very different from that of the Indo-European syntax common to Pali and English. But however much particular representations of time in language may be irreducibly thick descriptions, and

however much the meaning of time in particular lexicons may be constructed by the work of culture, at a minimalist level, perception of the non-repetitive physical processes of growth, aging, and death, and of the repetitive occurrence of seasons, generational roles, etc., is universal. Every day, every week, every year moves everyone closer, irreversibly, to death; each day, week, and year is a recurrence of the same circadian, calendrical and/or seasonal patterns; and every individual's unrepeatable accession to a new stage of life is but one more example of the genre. Representations of time will obviously vary from place to place, from time to time, across different social strata at one and the same place and time, and indeed in one individual for different purposes (subatomic physicists, astronomers, and farmers can all celebrate anniversaries, enjoy sunsets, and feel grief at funerals). The truth – indeed the truism – that the repetitive and non-repetitive modes of time exist simultaneously, always and everywhere, seems to me so monumentally obvious that it becomes difficult to see how the mystifications of theologians like Augustine and Eliade could ever have succeeded in obscuring it. How can one put this? To borrow from Samuel Beckett: when every day the sun shines, having no alternative, on the nothing new, the pace at which all that fall fall never slows, nor does it ever quicken.[6] In Buddhism, the power of impermanence over human life –a power to which even Buddhas must one day succumb – is the shared, always repeated experience of Everyman and Everywoman, and it is the Truth taught, as is periodically necessary, by every Buddha.

INDIVIDUAL VERSUS COLLECTIVE TIME: CAN HISTORY END? WAS GOTAMA UNIQUE?

In Buddhism, there is no original 'once upon a time'; each cosmic aeon begins, although there was no beginning to the sequence of

aeons. But in nirvana it does have, for individuals, an analogue to 'and so they lived happily ever after'. The suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) inherent in an impermanent and conditioned world receives no *explanation* in Buddhism, in the sense that there is no aetiological myth of its ultimate origin. *Saṃsāra* is beginningless, with no earliest point. The *Visuddhimagga* argues that in the chain of Dependent Origination, ignorance and craving are made the starting point(s) (literally 'put at the head') not because they constitute a 'causeless root-cause' of the world, like the original Nature (*prakṛti*) of the Hindu Sāṃkhya system, but because each represents a special(ly important) cause of karma. But the beginningless round of rebirth is nonetheless resolved, understood, and transcended in thought, by being placed in a master-text in which it can be brought to an end, for the individual, in nirvana. One might well ask whether all sentient creatures could one day attain nirvana, and, if so, would the universe as a whole end? Such questions, although on a few occasions addressed in other parts of the Buddhist tradition, are said in Pali texts specifically, and for specific reasons, to be unanswerable and to be set aside. Some readers may find surprising the absence of any notion of a collective end, any account of the ending of all humanity in non-repetitive time. But this is simply a fact of cultural difference: thanks no doubt to Judaic and Christian collectivism (among other things), it is a usual Western assumption that dramas of time and salvation (or, indeed, damnation) must involve humankind as a whole moving from a unique beginning through non-repetitive time to its end. But Buddhist thought, like much Indian world-renunciatory religion, is individualist; this can be argued in many ways, but here I refer to the fact that non-repetitive time can only end for individuals. Buddhist dramas of humankind as a whole are never-ending: only privatized, individual time can end, not public. There can be no end to history.

Is Buddhism eternally true? Could impermanence itself be impermanent? (There are analogies here with the 'Cretan liar' paradox – Epimenides the Cretan said that 'all Cretans are liars' – and with the paradox of relativism – is it universally true that 'all truth is relative'? – where in both cases, if the statement is true, it implies its own falsity.) Impermanence is a characteristic of the conditioned universe of space and time that obtains universally, eternally (but not in the timeless Unconditioned), and so the proposition that asserts it is always and everywhere true, whether anyone knows it or not. To use a simple example: '2 + 2 = 4' is always true, whether or not anyone utters the equation. It might become the case that after a nuclear catastrophe, for example, there could be no-one left to know or say that '2 + 2 = 4'; but that will not stop it being true. Similarly, the eternal truths of Buddhism – such as impermanence, conditioning, not-self – constitute the *dhammatā*, the way things truly, timelessly are. In the terminology of Buddhist systematic thought, the category-matrix of existing things (Existents, *dhamma*-s) never changes. Actual instances of Existents, however, are impermanent. Types, one might say, are eternal; tokens of them are not. (Contrast this with modern historicism, which hold that types can also change.)

'Seeing (things) as they really are', *yathābhūta-dassana*, is a standard synonym for Enlightenment. Any particular utterance about the way things really are, of course, as an event or sequence of events in the spatio-temporal universe, is contingent, conditioned, and impermanent. Knowledge and utterances of the truth about things constitute the *sāsana*, the 'Dispensation' of a Buddha; as an historically instantiated and institutionalized body of knowledge, it is itself subject to the truth of impermanence. One day it too will disappear.

How many times has the Truth been discovered, and what will happen after Gotama's Dispensation has succumbed to the law of

impermanence? A number of answers are possible, in the sense that they are not logically self-contradictory: he could be the only Buddha, there could be a specific number, or there could be an infinite number of Truth-discoverers. And the choice here is, in part, related to the question of whether the universe is infinite, whether it has a beginning or end; as already discussed, traditional Theravāda assumes a beginningless and endless universe. Individual series of lives in non-repetitive time can come to an end in nirvana, but Buddhist dramas of humankind as a whole are never-ending. History passes (linearly) through repeated cycles of time, in the sense that the larger-scale sequence of aeons, just like our shorter sequences of days and months, constantly repeats the same pattern. In such a worldview, it seems difficult (though it would not be not self-contradictory) to imagine Gotama Buddha as a unique 'prophet', like Christ, or as a final and definitive one, like Muhammad – at least if one considers whether a culturally viable religion could be based on the idea that knowledge of the truth, and thus the possibility of salvation, had been recently discovered – just once, or for the last time – and would be in time forgotten, in a universe without beginning or end. But one need not speculate on what is or is not culturally viable, since the earliest texts provide an answer to the question; they say that there is a plurality of Buddhas: 'Whether Tathāgatas arise or do not arise, this fact remains (true) [or "this state of affairs obtains"]: (there is) the (conditioned) existence of Existents (*dhamma*-s), the regularity of [the way in which] Existents [are conditioned], the fact that things have specific conditions.' After Gotama's Enlightenment, the Brahmā Sahampati persuaded him to teach, despite his initial hesitation. In one short version Sahampati declares: 'Those Blessed Ones, who in the past were Arahants, Perfectly Enlightened Ones, (all) lived honouring the Truth [i.e., by teaching it], respecting it, adhering to it. [So too

will] those Blessed Ones who in the future will be Arahants, Perfectly Enlightened Ones … May he who is now the Blessed One, an Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One … [do the same].' A curious episode related a number of times in the Canon tells of how the monk Sāriputta 'roared a lion's roar', declaring that there is no ascetic, Brahmin, or 'Blessed One' (i.e., Buddha) past, present, or future who is greater or wiser than Gotama. The Buddha, in a tone somewhere in the areas of mockery, reproach, and serious interrogation, asks him whether he has had direct, telepathic knowledge of all past and future Buddhas, and of himself (Gotama). Forced to concede that he has not, Sāriputta then explains that he based his lion's roar on an 'inference from (the) *Dhamma*' (*dhammanvāya*), which tells him that all Buddhas, past, present, and future, must be, with respect to their Enlightening knowledge, the same. In the canonical text to which the later image of the City of Nirvana may be traced (discussed in the previous chapter), Gotama says that he has rediscovered 'the ancient road, the old straight path travelled by Perfectly Enlightened Ones of former times'. Buddhas nirvanize once and for all, but Buddhahood recurs.

But the fact that multiple Buddhas are implied by the logic of Buddhist thought does not mean, of course, that a fully worked out system of named past and future Buddhas was present from the very start. And this, indeed, seems not to have been the case: with the exception of the *Buddhavaṃsa* (to be discussed in the next chapter), past and future Buddhas as named characters are not frequent in the canonical texts, and still less so are stories about them. The *Buddhavaṃsa* tells the stories of twenty-four former Buddhas, and names three more previous to the first, Dīpaṃkara. Of future Buddhas, only one, Metteyya, is mentioned. But texts of the 'History of the Future' family (*Anāgatavaṃsa*) name up to ten,

and tell their stories. The point here, then, is that the idea of multiple Buddhas is implied by the most basic statements of Buddhist systematic thought, and that this is acknowledged by the earliest texts. The issue of narratives about them is another matter.

THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

In Chapter 1 I argued that nirvana provides closure in both systematic and narrative forms of cognitive and textual process; in systematic thought, it makes Buddhist cosmology (and thereby, its psychology) a *universe*, in the etymological sense of the term, a single whole. In narrative(s), nirvana provides, in Frank Kermode's well-known phrase, *the sense of an ending*,[7] in both the Buddhist master-text and countless actual texts and ritual sequences. I call this sense of an ending, this closure, a *syntactic* element of Buddhist narrative(s), as opposed to *semantic*: whatever meanings may be explicitly represented in any given medium, nirvana as ultimate closure is always and everywhere a latent, structuring presence.

It is now usual in studies of narrative to distinguish between the time covered by the events and situations represented, and the time taken by acts or processes of representation; this is story time versus discourse time, *erzählte Zeit* versus *Erzählzeit*. A story may, for example, cover the whole of someone's life, narrating it as a total of, say, seventy years, but the narration of it will not take seventy years to read or perform: perhaps, say, merely seventy minutes, or even seven. Endings in narrated time and in the time of narration can and often do coincide. Nirvana provides 'the sense of an ending' in both narrated time and the time of narration:

In *narrated time*, coherence and resolution in one person's lifetime are derived in part from connectedness with

previous and subsequent lives; the problem of evil and injustice is understood as part of the cosmic scheme of *karma*, cause and effect, a scheme in which, ultimately, there is no injustice, for all get their just deserts. But the sequence of lives as a whole, the very fact of conditioning and *karma*, finds its own resolution, its own avoidance of meaningless chronology, in the possibility of Release. Nirvana can offer satisfactory closure, where the mere breaking-off of life occasioned by death cannot.

In *the time of narration*, mention of nirvana can be seen to signal closure in the actual performance-time of texts (reading, reciting, and in other contexts).

There is a clear and persuasive consensus among scholars about the function of endings; Barbara Hernnstein Smith describes poetic closure as 'a modification of structure that makes *stasis*, or the absence of further continuation, the most probable succeeding event. Closure allows the reader to be satisfied by the failure of continuation or, put another way, it creates in the reader the expectation of nothing.'[8] Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* defines 'end' as follows:

> The final incident in a Plot or Action. The end follows but is not followed by other incidents and ushers in a state of (relative) stability. Students of Narrative have pointed out that the end occupies a determinative position because of the light it sheds (or might shed) on the meaning of events leading up to it. The end functions as the (partial) condition, the magnetizing force, the organizing principle of narrative: reading (processing) a narrative is, amongst other things, waiting for the end, and the nature of the waiting is related to the nature of the narrative.[9]

Finally, Paul Ricoeur adds an important rider: 'It is in the act of retelling rather than in that of telling that this structural function of closure can be discerned.' In any telling, 'the configuration of the

plot imposes the "sense of an ending" … on the indefinite succession of incidents', but when a story is already known, to follow it is 'to apprehend the episodes which are themselves well known as leading to this end'.[10]

ENDING(S) IN NARRATED TIME (*ERZÄHLTE ZEIT*)$_1$: NON-REPETITIVE TIME

Part of the work of culture in regard to death, it seems safe to say, is to transform it from a mute biological event, an arbitrary cessation, to a comprehensible life-cycle transition within an articulated narrative, and so provide an acceptable closure to the material, embodied saga we (can thereby) call a biography. Without such an ending individual lives are, just as much as collective history, just one damn thing after another, coming to a stop wherever they happen to, for whatever reason (or none). A major function of religious ideologies in premodern civilizations was to provide a discursive representation in which individual and/or collective endings could make sense, to offer a resolution to mere chronology, an ordering of the chaos of moments, by narrating individual lives as parts of a master-text. Texts and textualization – the civilizationally enunciative work of a class of clerics, constructing and maintaining a socially prestigious, elite Tradition – are not therefore simply decorative, elaborating a 'high' culture for aesthetes, but construing inevitabilities of life and death that concern everyone.

I am using the words 'text' and 'textualize' in two ways. First, there is what I am calling the Buddhist master-text. The word 'text' here refers not to an individual sequence of words, embodied in some oral or written artefact, but to an overall, 'grand' narrative of the universe, rebirth, and salvation; this is an abstraction, an ideal object implicit in, or presupposed by, particular texts. Second, there

are just such actual texts, oral or written; one might, on occasion, include iconographic objects or ritual sequences in this second category. No such text, clearly, could ever be coterminous with the master-text, but can only instantiate some part(s) of it.

I argued in Chapter 1 that eternity as either endlessness or timelessness cannot be narratively figured; and, as has been shown in Chapters 2 and 3, both the concept and the imagery of nirvana eventuate, by design, in aporetic silence. Nirvana is the (only possible) full stop (period) in Buddhist story-telling, the point at which narrative imagination must cease. But this cessation provides the sense of an ending rather than a mere breaking-off: the words *pariyosāṇaṭṭhena*, literally 'in the sense of an ending', as well as *nibbāna-pariyosāna* and *-parāyaṇa*, both meaning 'with nirvana as an end', are found. Nirvana is a moment within a discursive or practical dynamic, a formal element of closure in the structure of Buddhist imagination, texts, and rituals. This is the sense in which I am arguing that nirvana has a syntactic role in Buddhist discourse as well as a semantic value (as concept and/or metaphor): it is the moment of ending that gives structure to the whole. The fact of narrative structure and closure provides a meaningful and satisfying resolution, although in itself nirvana has merely the formal value of a closure-marker.

For any individual, the denouement of the story of spiritual liberation – *Bildungsroman* on a cosmic scale, and the completion of a Sentimental Education, of a special kind – is both the discovery of Truth and a change in being. Buddhist thought about rebirth and release blends what might otherwise be distinguished as epistemology and ontology. When the saint realizes the Truth, it is not that he or she has simply acquired some new knowledge, but rather that such knowledge instantiates a new existential state or condition for that individual. The ending of

unsatisfactoriness, nirvana-closure, can be represented in relation to any individual, to any single sequence of lives; but the paradigmatic story of such an ending, constantly reiterated in texts, temple murals, and other media, is the story of Gotama the Buddha. There seem to have been very few complete biographies of the Buddha (Gotama or others), as separate, individual texts, in early Buddhist history, but the whole iconographic record shows that the main features of the Buddha-legend must have been widely known in order that the sometimes complex depictions of particular scenes, in texts and in both iconic and aniconic visual forms, should make sense to those for whom they were intended.

ENDING(S) IN NARRATED TIME (*ERZÄHLTE ZEIT*)$_2$: REPETITIVE TIME

The universe, being infinite, is in the Pali imaginaire beginningless and endless; and although all existing things – apart from nirvana – are always and everywhere impermanent, the fact of the universal impermanence of Existents is a necessary, and so in that sense permanent, feature of the universe. So any and every person's dying, and then either being reborn or, if Enlightenment intervenes, attaining nirvana, can be seen to be a reiterated ending: one might say that a death followed by a rebirth is a Bad Death; attaining nirvana – that is, not Enlightenment but final nirvana, the nirvana of the aggregates, 'death as (complete) cutting off' – would then be the only real kind of Good Death. But using the word 'death' here for the attainment of final nirvana can, for reasons explored in the last two chapters, be seriously misleading. But I want to put it that way in order to begin an exploration – which will continue in the next chapter – of endings in repetitive

time seen through the lens of the existence of multiple Buddhas. In Pali texts, Buddhas are explicitly and forthrightly said, unlike in many other kinds of Buddhism, to occur only once at a time; they do so *seriatim*, infinitely, although the intervals between them are of varying length. Each one instantiates the same general pattern; to use the vocabulary of contemporary philosophy, each individual, like 'our Buddha Gotama' (a very common phrase, with many emotional as well as conceptual implications for Buddhists), is a token of the same type. The idea of multiple Buddhas, past and present, is inherent in the logic of all Buddhist thought; but there is a scholarly historical story to tell about the evolution in the specificity with which they are imagined, and the increasing importance to the tradition they have. But that is not the present concern.

In later Pali texts, what I have been calling 'final nirvana', i.e., that which supervenes at the death of an enlightened person, is said in the case of Buddhas to be in fact not absolutely the last word; each Buddha continues to exist and to be potentially present to people after his death. ('Exist' and 'be present' here cry out for further interpretation; by themselves they are misleading.) The historical Buddhism currently in existence, thanks to the Buddha Gotama, will disappear, and some time thereafter the next Buddha Metteyya (Sanskrit: Maitreya) will arise. Each Buddha discovers the enlightening Truth (*Dhamma*) for himself, and then founds his own *sāsana*, a historically specific Teaching or Dispensation, which lasts through time but comes to an end; and then, after an interval of indeterminate length, another Buddha occurs, to do the same thing. And so on. The disappearance of each Buddha's *sāsana* came to be standardly described in terms of five disappearances, one of which is 'the nirvana of the relics'. The five disappearances, which occur in a specific order, are:

(i) practice (of the Path);
(ii) learning (of the Three Baskets of the Pali canon);
(iii) realization (of various achievements attained through practice);
(iv) the signs of monastic life (i.e., even the yellow robe as a signifier of worthy recipients of gifts); and
(v) the nirvana of the relics, *dhātu*-(*pari*)*nibbāna*.

At some time in the future, when relics are no longer afforded any veneration, they will come together at the site of the Buddha's Enlightenment in India (via Sri Lanka), to make a *rūpa* of the Buddha (this may mean an image, a statue, but could be some other means of representation). Most texts say that this form of the Buddha, also called a *dhātu-sarīra*, a body of relics, will manifest the beauty of a (or the Gotama) Buddha's body and perform a miracle like one performed by Gotama; one text adds that it/he will preach a sermon, which the audience of deities will hear. The relic-body will catch fire, burning with a flame extending up to the heavens, until the last relic has gone to 'the state beyond conceptualization', *appaññattika-bhāva*, a term standardly used in commentaries for nirvana after the death of a enlightened person. Deities from all over the universe will lament even more grievously than they did on the day of the Buddha's death, saying: 'This is the last sight (*dassana*) of him!' Then they will perform rituals as they did after the Buddha's death.

How to set about understanding and interpreting all this? There are three main ways in which a Buddha can be said – *said*, indeed, in a *façon de parler* – to exist after his death, until the disappearance of his Teaching (*sāsana*) and the nirvana of the relics:

(i) as/in his Teaching, or more simply in the Truth (*Dhamma*) which he has made known, once again, to the world;

(ii) in images, statues and other visual forms; and
(iii) in his relics.

In thinking through these matters, I suggest that whatever wording we adopt, we should avoid two obvious paradigms from Christianity: the incarnation of Christ in a (non-repetitive) historical human body, and the repeated ritual of the Eucharist, in which God's body is made present. The 'presence' of the Buddhas, in whatever form, is better understood, I suggest, in terms of 'presence' in theatre; and Buddha-statues can be, as Ernst Gombrich described so well in writing on European tradition, *symbolic images*;[11] that is, they are as much images of Buddhahood as of any particular (historical) Buddha, as much images of *something* as of *someone*. Altogether too often, the situation is described as if, given the Buddha Gotama's absence in nirvana and a felt need for his presence, Buddhists turned to images, relics, or whatever, to fill the void. But this is, to borrow another phrase from Samuel Beckett, to look at the issue arsy-versy; what we are presented with are the texts, artefacts, and social theatre of a civilizational imaginaire, which performs simultaneously the so-called absence and presence of the Buddha. These two aspects of the phenomenon, if we choose to retain the words, are mutually constitutive. The Buddha's presence is not a reaction to his actual or perceived absence; his very specifically and carefully modulated forms of existence after final nirvana in images and relics are ways in which his absence is brought into being. We do not best appreciate this (or explain it) by applying metaphysical language.

The Buddha as his teaching

On a number of occasions in Canonical texts the Buddha identifies himself with his teaching, as in the very frequently quoted remark that

'he who sees the *Dhamma* sees me, he who sees me sees the *Dhamma*'. Later texts develop the idea by saying that the Teaching is his *Dhamma*-body (*dhamma-kāya*, or *-sarīra*), in contrast with his form- or material body (*rūpa-kāya*), which came to an end with his death; for example, when the monk Ānanda begins each *Sutta* with 'Thus I have heard', he 'makes present (perceptible, before one's eyes, *paccakkhaṃ*) the Blessed One's *Dhamma*-body'; then, by means of the immediately following phrase, 'at one time the Blessed One (was living at ...)', 'he shows the Blessed One's (present) non-existence (*avijjamāna-bhāva*) and reminds (the audience) of the nirvana of (his) form-body'. When a Buddha rediscovers the timeless truth, the *Dhamma*, he creates an historically specific sequence of events in linear time called a Dispensation, *sāsana*. The *sāsana* is described as moving, or being carried; sometimes the word connotes texts, when people memorize them, take them to a new place, etc., either in their heads or as physical, written objects (which are then the object, behaviourally, of veneration themselves); sometimes it moves with famous images, such as the Emerald Buddha and Sinhala Buddha, now come to rest in Thailand; sometimes the Buddha's *sāsana* is said to be established (*patiṭṭhita*, *patiṭṭhāpita*, the simple and causative past passive participles of √*paṭi-sthā*, to stand) when a young man from the region is for the first time ordained as a novice; etc. A *sāsana* is something which has an inside and an outside (designated by a grammatical form such as the locative case *sāsane*, and/or with a preposition). The *Dhamma* can never end; *sāsana*-s come and go (the latter at the nirvana of the relics), just like everything else, always ending.

The Buddha as his image

Although a number of uncertainties beset our understanding of the earlier history of images and image-veneration in Buddhism, there

is no doubt that they – in both iconic and, as in a footprint, aniconic forms – came to play an important role in mediating the Buddha's presence-and-absence. This is amply attested in modern ethnography, and the following examples from texts suffice to express the point. In one Canonical passage the Buddha describes giving a gift to 'both Orders (*sc.* of monks and nuns) with the Buddha at their head' (*Buddha-pamukha*), and 'to both Orders after the Tathāgata's nirvana'. The commentary interprets *Buddha-pamukha* in the first case as the Buddha's being physically in front of the two Orders, with monks on one side and nuns on the other. In the second case, it asks: 'But can a gift be given to both Orders, with the Buddha in front (of them) after the Tathāgata has attained (final) nirvana? It can. How? An image (*paṭimā*) (of the Buddha) containing relics should be put on a seat facing the two Orders, and a stand put there, and when the offerings of water and the rest have been made, everything is first to be offered to the Teacher, and (only then) given to the two Orders.' The adventures of specific images are frequently recounted in historical (*vaṃsa*) texts; often such texts are entirely devoted to the history of an image.

There are many analogies between what one might call in the general the phenomenon and the practice(s) of *pūjā* in Hinduism and in Buddhism (and, indeed, elsewhere in Southern Asia and worldwide): the root √*pūj*, like the English 'worship' originally, means anything from simply (without metaphysical specification) 'to respect, venerate', and the like, all the way to 'idolize', in the sense of 'to treat as an idol, as an incarnate deity' (in Western and/or South Asian senses). The actions of offering things – flowers, fruit, incense, candles, or whatever – can often be, or at least look, the same. In some forms of Hinduism, a metaphysical theology has been developed in which a statue, for example, at a specific ritual moment – often when the eyes are painted – is considered to be

entered by a deity, such that the image becomes, literally, an incarnation of that deity. It is true that in the Buddhist case, painting the eyes, for example, can also be a vital transformative moment within what is called (as also in Hinduism) the consecration (*abhiseka*) of an image.[12] *But*: Pali Buddhist texts have never developed any 'theology', that is to say, any meta-account of the relationship between a/the nirvanized Buddha (or Buddhahood) and images of him (it). To be sure, the word *buddha* can often denote, directly, the concept of a Buddha-image, and/or a particular statue. (In this case, as everywhere, it is important to remember that Pali has no definite or indefinite articles, so that even to translate *buddha* as 'a Buddha' or 'the Buddha' is to make an interpretive choice.) For an external observer, therefore, to say that the Buddha 'is present' in an image, or to use some typographic device such as italicization, or an analogous intonation of voice, in claiming, for example, that 'the image *is* the Buddha', is for me another example of filling in Buddhist silences, providing discourse when Buddhist texts have deliberately refrained from doing so.

The Buddha as his relics

Statues of the Buddha, although allowing him to be 'seen' in a rather obvious way, in fact are usually thought only to mediate his presence in a stronger sense if they contain relics.[13] In an often-quoted passage of the *Mahāvaṃsa*, the Great Chronicle, the monk Mahinda, who has but recently arrived in Ceylon to establish Buddhism there, tells the king that he has not seen the Buddha for a long time; the king responds: 'Did you not say that the Buddha has attained nirvana?' Mahinda replies: 'Seeing the relics is seeing the Conqueror (*dhātūsu ditthesu dittho hoti jino*).' A similar phrase is used elsewhere in the commentarial passage dealing with the

nirvana of the relics: so long as relics exist, so long can the Buddha be seen; but when the relics disappear, such sight (*dassana*, another term with an extensive psycho-theology in Hinduism, as Sanskrit *darśana*, but with no systematic counterpart in Pali) comes to an end; the Buddha finally nirvanizes, this time for ever, when his relics become invisible, by going to the state beyond conceptualization.

In repetitive time, therefore, the attainment – in non-repetitive time – of final nirvana by individuals (Buddhas and others), the continuing presence of Buddhas/Buddhahood in their Teaching, images, and relics, and the eventual nirvana of the relics, all instantiate a general and continually repeated pattern. The master-text that narrates this beginningless and endless sequence transcribes eternity, in two senses: its cosmology extends time backwards and forwards endlessly, in the universe of conditioning, *saṃsāra*; and it is this that provides the discursive *Said* through which the *Unsaid* – eternity as timeless nirvana – is possible as an object of thought. Earlier I called nirvana the full stop (period) in the Buddhist story; now I can add that it is a full stop in an eternal story; a full stop which brings closure to individual lives in a master-text that itself can have no final ending. The language of 'cyclical' time is often unhelpful; it is not time that is cyclical, but the structure of it, the processes that occur in it: just as we think of time as a sequence of repeated days, weeks, months, and years, so developed Indian thought sees these smaller-scale repetitions as parts of the much larger-scale repetitive sequence of aeons. Whether or not the internal structure of each aeon is seen as degenerative, such that we live in the last, evil, and pain-filled *Kali-yuga*, the overall process in both Hinduism and Buddhism is one of repeated beginnings and endings, creative explosions and destructive implosions.

ENDING AS AN EVENT IN THE TIME OF NARRATION (*ERZÄHLZEIT*)

Actual texts are recited in actual time; the internal durational form of a text is embodied in non-repetitive time every time it is read or heard. This is true of any reading, individual or communal: whether a text is recited internally as part of a person's meditation practice, or recited publicly on recurrent ritual or festival occasions, the running through of a text's internal linear duration becomes itself a form of repetition. It is, I think, particularly important to remember in this context that throughout history, until very recent times in some (particularly urban) areas, Buddhist texts have been predominantly oral phenomena. They are said to have been preserved and read orally (that is, recited and listened to) for some 300 years before being committed to writing in the first century BC; and even after that a wealth of evidence shows that manuscripts have existed largely as *aides-mémoire* for monks, who would then recite the texts publicly. The modern sense of 'reading' a text, here as often, leaves out of account so much of the actual experiential features of Buddhist literature in social and historical context. Public recitation of a text, like a sermon, resembles a dramaturgical performance as much as (perhaps more than) it resembles the static lines-of-text model of 'reading a book'. The dynamics of closure, in this perspective, are more than just a general point about texts providing the sense of an ending that life (or death) cannot. They are quite literally moments in a (ritual) performance. Analogous things might be said about other media: for example, walking round a temple and seeing paintings (usually the same ones, in the same order) representing the Buddha's life. Here I will restrict my remarks to Pali texts.

The nirvanic ending-moment occurs in the time of narration in a variety of ways:

(i) As the end of a sermon. Commentaries note the value of ending a discourse, *desānaṃ niṭṭhāpeti*, bringing it to a climax, (*ni*)*kūṭaṃ* (or -*ena*) *gaṇhāti*, with a reference to final *nirvana* or to Enlightenment, Arahantship.

(ii) As the climax of various series of epithets, synonyms, and sections within texts. Examples of this are numerous: in the First Sermon, the Middle Way is said to 'make for vision, wisdom, leading to calming, higher knowledge, Enlightenment, nirvana'; in a common sequence the Buddha says: 'With regard to both conditioned and unconditioned *dhamma*-s, the best of them (all) is dispassion … the crushing of pride, the removal of thirst, the uprooting of attachment, the termination of the round (of rebirth), the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nirvana.' In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* a sequence of short *Sutta*-s is made up of a long list of such synonyms (literal and metaphorical), in relation to each of which the Buddha claims to teach the Path; the sequence culminates with *parāyaṇaṃ*, 'the end', and the concluding recapitulation of the terms themselves ends with nirvana. Elsewhere lists of questions (*pucchā*), 'subjects for discussion' (*katthāvatthūni*), and recitation sections (*bhāṇavāra*, literally 'turnings of recitation') end with nirvana.

(iii) As the climax to a list meditational states. (Meditation Levels culminating with the Cessation of Perception and Feeling are also common.)

(iv) As an aspiration for the audience added at the end of recitations: the medieval text *Saddhamma-saṅgaha*, for example, which was intended for public recitation, ends most of its chapters with the verse: 'Thus knowing that impermanence is wretched and hard to overcome, let the wise (person) quickly strive for the eternal deathless state (*niccaṃ amataṃ padaṃ*).'

(v) As an aspiration for the audience at the end of sermons. This can be attested by anyone who has heard Buddhist monks preaching: the monk will end with a wish that all present will one day attain nirvana, which is greeted with cries of '*Sādhu*, *sādhu*', literally 'Good' or 'Yes', but with the same practical function as the Christian 'Amen'.

(vi) As an aspiration by authors/redactors in the epilogue (*nigamana*) of their texts, or by the scribe in the colophon of manuscripts. Very often the reference or aspiration to nirvana in these contexts will be joined with a wish to be reborn at the time of the next Buddha Metteyya as the means to that end.

The very first sermon in the Canonical list, the *Brahmajāla Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, consists mostly of a long list of wrong practices and views, and assertions of the Buddha's superiority to them. But this too, as the commentary points out, is brought to a climactic conclusion – every time it is recited – by the mention of final nirvana, referring forward to the Buddha's own future: 'Monks, the Tathāgata's body remains (alive) with that which (would otherwise) lead it to rebirth [i.e., craving] cut off. While that body remains (alive) gods and men will see him, but after the break-up of the body, when life will have been completely used up, they will not.' The collection of brief texts called the *Udāna* likewise – every time – ends with two passages concerning the nirvana of the monk Dabba Mallaputta, who was introduced in Chapter 2 in connection with the words (*pari*) *nibbāna* and (*pari*)*nibbuta*. The prose story is almost identical in both, followed by different concluding Spirited Utterances in verse. The first goes like this (omitting some repetitions):

Thus I have heard. At one time the Blessed One was living at Rājagaha, in the (place called the) Squirrels' Feeding ground in the Bamboo Grove. The venerable Dabba Mallaputta approached him, greeted him and sat down on

one side. As he sat there he said to the Blessed One: 'Now is the time for my final nirvana, Happy One'. 'As you wish' (replied the Buddha). Then Dabba got up from his seat, saluted the Blessed One, walked around him (ceremonially) keeping him to his right, rose into the air, and sitting cross legged in the sky attained a level of meditation based on the contemplation of fire. Emerging from that attainment he attained final nirvana: his body caught fire and burnt, leaving no ashes or soot to be seen, in the same way as when ghee or oil burns they leave no trace of ashes or soot. The Blessed One saw what happened, and at that time made this Spirited Utterance [concerning the Five Aggregates which were the continuing temporal entity called, in its last phase, the monk and Arahant Dabba]:

'The body disintegrated, (perceptual and cognitive) awareness (*sañña*) ceased, all feelings went cold; Conditioning Factors were calmed, con sciousness set (like the sun).'

The second passage happens later at another location, where the Buddha recounts the story of Dabba's nirvana, this time concluding with: 'Just as it is not possible to know the whereabouts (*gati*) of a burning fire gradually put out by blows from an iron hammer, so it is impossible to know the whereabouts of those who are rightly released [i.e., by means of the Path], who have crossed over the floods and bonds of passion and attained (the) immovable happiness (of nirvana).'

In later Southeast Asian Pali texts, the word *nibbāna* came to be used in this way, with proper names, for the life-story of an enlightened person; that is, it became a genre-title for what we might call a biography: *Mahākaccāyana-nibbāna*, 'The Biography of the Great Kaccāyana', or 'How the Great Kaccāyana's life (indeed, series of lives), came to an end'.[14]

CHAPTER 5

Past and future Buddhas

Thus far, this book's meditations on the concept, imagery, and narrative role of nirvana have considered it primarily as a goal for any individual: to attain (*pari*)nirvana, in life and at the moment of death, is to become characterized by the epithet *buddha*, 'awakened'. In turning now to some closer and more extended analyses of textual dynamics, of narrative as an expression and embodiment of temporality, it will look more at those special people for whom *Buddha* is not merely an adjective but a name. The person whose life-story is so often told as that of the Buddha Gotama – who in Pali is specified as such either by his family name Gotama or by the phrase *aṃhākaṃ Buddho*, 'our Buddha' – can be singled out in Roman script by using the definite article, capitalizing the word, or both: not just a person who is *buddha*, but one who is (for us) 'a' or (more often) 'the Buddha'. In Pali, such Buddhas, in the past, present, and future, are differentiated from ordinary (!) enlightened people by being called *sammā-saṃbuddha*-s, Fully Enlightened Beings. They rediscover the Truth (*Dhamma*) by themselves, at a time when it has been lost, and re-institutionalize the dissemination of the Truth in a Dispensation (*sāsana*). In contrast, ordinary enlightened people, male and female Arahants, are *buddha*, 'awakened', and they become so by hearing the salvific message from a Fully Enlightened Buddha or from one of his disciples or later followers. They are also called *sāvaka*-s (Sanskrit: *śrāvaka*),

Hearers. The time-space world of *saṃsāra* is infinite; there have been and will be again an infinite number of (upper-case) Buddhas, each founding a Dispensation during the existence of which other people can become awakened, *buddha*. Theravāda Buddhism is different from Mahāyāna Buddhism in this regard only in that it regards this infinity of Buddhas as happening in a series, once at a time, rather than, as does Mahāyāna, thinking that more than one Buddha can exist at the same time.

Specific arguments are given in texts as to why there cannot be two Buddhas at the same time. They are called *bodhisatta*-s, a word which means either 'capable of Enlightenment' or 'intent on Enlightenment', but for which the general term 'future Buddha' is quite appropriate. Many stories have, at any one time, future Buddhas meeting with then-present Buddha; such a meeting between an individual and a Buddha is a necessary constituent in the individual's becoming such a *bodhisatta*, a future *sammā-sambuddha*: the individual makes an Aspiration (*adhiṭṭhāna*) for Buddhahood, and the then-present Buddha makes a Prediction (*veyyākaraṇa*) that he will become one. (One has to say *he* here, since one of the eight conditions for future Buddhahood is male gender; after the Prediction is given, that individual series of lives can never again be female.) As has been seen, the fact of multiple Buddhas is inherent in the logic of basic Buddhist thought; it is a presupposition of the entire system. But historically, it seems, the process of naming some of them, and telling stories about them in addition to the story of Gotama, developed only gradually. Some are mentioned in *Sutta*-s, texts taken to be early, but the genre in which they are most developed is that of the *vaṃsa*.

The lives of past, present, and future Buddhas have both similarities and differences, which are schematized and often given in lists; such lists of epithets and attributes were often used in ritual

chanting. Modern translations often systematize information about Buddhas, as do I below. When such lists are not, or at least only to some extent, narrativized, dramatic tensions, naturally, are minimized; each and every Buddha goes through much the same thing, by rote as it were. But some narratives do maintain dramatic tension, sometimes to the point of melodrama. The story of the Buddha's life must be one of the most widely told stories in all of world civilization, and rightly so. Modern Western tellings, of which new versions appear every year, psychologize and dramatize it: the young prince, dissatisfied with the life of luxury, leaves the enclosed life of the palace and discovers the truth of suffering and death, and, seeing the example of an ascetic, leaves home in order to struggle to transcend the world and becomes the perfectly serene and compassionate Saviour. In thinking through the issue of the narrativity of a/the Buddha's life one should bear in mind A. K. Ramanujan's wise and witty *bon mot* about the *Rāmāyaṇa*: namely that in Asia no-one hears such stories for the first time.[1] It is significant that perhaps the most strikingly realist version in Pali – one that asks the listener to suspend disbelief and follow the tale as if hearing it for the first time – is told not about the present Buddha Gotama but about a past Buddha called Vipassī. The text (the *Mahāpadāna Sutta*) gives names and attributes of Vipassī and Gotama Buddhas, with five others in between; not only does it list various facts about each – length of life, names of chief disciples, etc.– but it gives a long list of events which are '(in) the nature of things (*dhammatā*)' and occur in the life of everyone. It then tells of his birth, the prediction that he will become either a Universal Monarch (a *cakkavatti*) or a Buddha, and how his father sequesters him in three palaces, one for each season, in an attempt to bring about the former of these two destinies. One must suspend one's disbelief, not only in the case of such things as the enormously extended length of life ascribed to

people at that time (80,000 years), but also in that of the possibility that a young man could grow up and quite literally never encounter certain facts of life (his age is not specified here – Gotama is twenty-nine – and he is not said to marry and have a son, as Gotama is). If one does this, the narrative style in which his next experiences are recounted is very effectively succinct and realistic. One day he goes out for a drive to a pleasure-park with his charioteer. They encounter a grey-haired old man, bent double and leaning on a stick. Vipassī asks the charioteer:

> 'What is the matter with this man? His hair is not like other men's, his body is not like other men's.'
>
> 'Prince,' is the reply, 'this is what is called an old man.'
>
> 'But why is he called an old man?'
>
> 'He is called old, Prince, because he has not long to live.'
>
> 'But am I liable to become old, and [am I] not exempt from old age?'
>
> 'Both you and I, Prince, are liable to become old, are not exempt from old age.'
>
> 'Well then, charioteer, that will do for today with the pleasure park. Return now to the palace.'
>
> '[After his return,] Prince Vipassī was overcome with grief and dejection, crying, "Shame on this thing birth, since to him who is born old age must manifest itself!"'

On two further excursions, the prince encounters, similarly for the first time, a sick man and a corpse. The exchanges with the charioteer are similar, and each time he returns to the palace in grief and dejection: 'Shame on this thing birth, since to him who is born sickness [and] death must manifest [themselves]!' It is important to see here that the prince's distress is as much cognitive as it is affective: he is rather like a child discovering death for the first time, and finding (as children do) that the difficulty it poses is as much conceptual as it is emotional. How can one make sense of a life that inevitably involves sickness, old age, and death? The

prince is not himself suffering directly from any of these problems; indeed, his father redoubles his efforts to surround the prince with 'the five-fold sense-pleasures', so that he will not become a renouncer, and forgo kingship. But when the prince goes out for the fourth and last time, his cognitive distress is alleviated by seeing a renouncer who is, the charioteer explains, 'one who truly follows Dhamma, who truly lives in serenity, does good actions, performs meritorious deeds, is harmless and truly has compassion for living beings'. The threat to coherence posed by old age, sickness, and death is avoided by setting human life and its defects in a universe where salvation from them is possible. The figure of the renouncer shifts the perspective of the story from the immediate here-and-now of a confused young man to that of the reflective, transcendentalist perspective that sets what is visible – old people, the sick, corpses – in the context of an unseen beyond, which shows the incoherent visible world to be part of a larger, coherent whole. Vipassī decides to renounce on the spot (unlike Gotama, usually). The rest of his story is told (again, assuming appropriate suspensions of disbelief) in an historically realist way, ending with three verse aphorisms presented as 'the teaching of (all the) Buddhas'. The Discourse itself ends with a brief coda in which Gotama repeats some facts about the seven Buddhas from the opening section.

So past Buddhas are at one and the same time formulaic instantiations of a general type, and also individuals whose encounter with the facts of life and whose salvific realization are vivid and individual. What is to be expected of future Buddhas?

Although the logical possibility of future Buddhas is clearly recognized in the earliest texts, in those now preserved as the Canon there is but one specific treatment of an individual: the next Buddha, Metteyya. It occurs in a text called *The Lion's Roar*

on the Wheel-turning King (*Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta*), a very important text for Buddhism and kingship. The Buddha tells a cautionary (in my view deliberately ironic and humorous) tale, of how things have declined from a fantasy utopia (where life lasted 80,000 years, kings provided wealth to their subjects so that poverty and theft were unknown), through a series of serio-comic mishaps, to their present sorry state. But this is not the worst:

> 'There will come a time, monks, when the descendants of these people [i.e., those contemporary with the Buddha] will live for (only) ten years. When people live for (only) ten years, their daughters will be ready for marriage at five. When people live for (only) ten years, these flavours will disappear: (those of) ghee, cream, oil, honey, molasses, and salt. When people live for (only) ten years, the primary food will be (a kind of bad) grain. Just as now, monks, rice, meat and rice porridge are the primary foods, so, monks, when people live for (only) ten years (a kind of bad) grain will be the primary food. When people live for (only) ten years, the Ten Good Deeds will completely disappear, and the Ten Bad Deeds will rage like a great fire. When people live for (only) ten years, the idea of "good" will not exist how will there be anyone who does good? When people live for (only) ten years, those who show lack of respect for their mother and father, for ascetics and Brahmins, and for the elders of their family will be revered and praised. Whereas now, monks, those who show respect for mother and father, for ascetics and Brahmins, and for the elders of one's family are revered and praised, when people live for (only) ten years, those who show lack of respect for their mother and father, for ascetics and Brahmins, and for the elders of their family will be revered and praised.
>
> 'When people live for (only) ten years, [men will not recognize women as] "mother", "mother's sister", "mother's brother's wife", "teacher's wife", or "women of our elders" the world will become thoroughly promiscuous, just as (it is) now among goats and sheep, fowl and pigs, dogs and jackals. When people live for (only) ten years, fierce mutual violence will arise among these beings, fierce ill will, fierce hatred, fierce thoughts of murder, in a son for his mother, in a mother for her son, in a son for his father, in a father for his son, in a brother for his brother, in a sister for her brother, and in a brother for his sister … Just as now, when a hunter sees an animal, fierce

violence, fierce ill will, fierce hatred, fierce thoughts of murder arise in him, so when people live for ten years, fierce mutual violence will arise among these beings, fierce ill will, fierce hatred, fierce thoughts of murder, in a son for his mother, in a mother for her son, in a son for his father, in a father for his son, in a brother for his brother, in a sister for her brother, and in a brother for his sister …

'When people live for (only) ten years, there will be a seven day period of war, when people will see each other as animals; sharp swords will appear in their hands and they will murder each other, each thinking, "This is an animal." But some of these beings will think, "Let me kill no one, let no one kill me. Why don't I go to some inaccessible place, in (thick) grass, in a forest, in a tree, by a river where it is difficult to walk, or on a rocky mountain, and eat wild roots and fruit to keep myself alive?" [And they will do so.] After the seven days have passed, they will emerge from their [hiding places] and embrace one another joyfully, exclaiming to one another, "Wonderful! (fellow) being, you are alive!" Then, monks, those beings will think, "It is because we have undertaken bad deeds that we have for so long been murdering our (own) relatives. Why don't we start doing good? (But) how do we do good? Why don't we abstain from killing? Let's undertake that good deed and practise it." They will abstain from killing, undertake this good deed and practise it. Because of their undertaking good deeds their vitality and beauty will increase, and those who live for ten years will have children who live for twenty.

'And then, monks, those beings will think, "It is because of undertaking good deeds that our length of life and beauty have increased. What if we were to do even more good? Why don't we abstain from taking what is not given; abstain from misconduct is sexual matters; abstain from telling lies; abstain from malicious speech; abstain from harsh speech; abstain from frivolous speech; abstain from covetousness; abstain from ill will; abstain from wrong view; abstain from three things: improper desire, iniquitous greed, and wrongfulness; why don't we abstain from lack of respect for one's mother and father, for ascetics and Brahmins, and for the elders of our families?" And they will have respect for their mother and father, for ascetics and Brahmins, and for the elders of their families; undertaking these good deeds they will practise them.

'Because of their undertaking these good deeds their vitality and beauty will increase: among these people, increasing with respect to vitality and beauty, those who live for twenty years will have children who live for

forty; those who live for forty years will have children who live for eighty [and so on, back to life times of 80,000 years].

'When people live for 80,000 years, their daughters will be ready for marriage at 500. When people live for 80,000 years, there will be only three kinds of disease: desire, hunger, and old age. When people live for 80,000 years, this Jambudīpa will be rich and prosperous, with villages, towns, and royal cities (so close that) a cock can fly [or: jump] from one to another. When people live for 80,000 years, this Jambudīpa will be as full of people as the Avīci hell, I should think, (or) like a thicket of reeds or grass! When people live for 80,000 years, this city of Benares will be called Ketumatī; it will be a rich and prosperous royal city, populous, full of people, and with (more than) enough to eat. When people live for 80,000 years, in this Jambudīpa there will be 84,000 cities, with the royal city of Ketumatī at their head.

'When people live for 80,000 years, in this royal city of Ketumatī there will arise a Wheel turning king called Saṅkha, righteous, a king of righteousness, a conqueror of the whole world, who will achieve stability in his country and possess the seven jewels. These seven jewels of his will be: the wheel jewel, the elephant jewel, the horse jewel, the gem jewel, the woman jewel, the householder jewel, and seventhly the adviser jewel. He will have more than a thousand sons, who will be valiant, of heroic (physical) form, crushing enemy armies. He will conquer this earth, surrounded by the ocean, and live from it, without violence, without a sword, according to what is right.

'When people live for 80,000 years, a Blessed One called Metteyya will arise in the world, an Arahant, a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha, endowed with (perfect) wisdom and conduct, a Happy One, one who will understand the world, an unsurpassed trainer of those who are to be tamed, a teacher of gods and men, a Buddha, a Blessed One, just as now I have arisen in the world, an Arahant, a Perfectly Enlightened Buddha, endowed with (perfect) wisdom and conduct, a Happy One, one who understands the world, an unsurpassed trainer of those who are to be tamed, a teacher of gods and men, a Buddha, a Blessed One. He will understand, realize experientially, and proclaim (the true nature of) the world with its gods, its Māras, Brahmas, its ascetics and Brahmins, this world of beings born as gods and men, just as now I understand, realize experientially, and proclaim (the true nature of) the world with its gods, its Māras, Brahmas, its ascetics and Brahmins, this world of beings born as gods and men. He will teach the *Dhamma*, in letter and in spirit, which is beautiful in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, and

make known (the virtues of) the pure, celibate life, just as now I teach the *Dhamma*, in letter and in spirit, which is beautiful in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, and make known (the virtues of) the pure, celibate life. He will have with him a monastic order of many thousands, just as now I have one of many hundreds.

'Then, monks, King Saṅkha will raise up [from under water] the palace which King Mahāpanāda had built and live in it. He will (then) give it away, let it go, give it as alms (for the use of) ascetics, Brahmins, indigents, tramps, and beggars. In the presence of the Blessed One Metteyya he will cut off his hair and beard, put on yellow robes, and go forth from home to homelessness. He will be a renouncer, alone and secluded, diligent, ener getic, self determined. Living thus it will not be long before in that very life he understands, realizes experientially, takes up, and lives (the achievement of) the celibate life, for which sons from good families rightly leave home for homelessness.'

There are two ways in which this vision of the future Buddha Metteyya is even more utopian than is the case with other Buddhas, including our Buddha Gotama: first, unusually though not uniquely, it envisages the coexistence of a Universal Monarch, a *cakkavatti*, and a Buddha, two possibilities that are usually, in the biography of a Buddha, represented as alternatives for a single person. Second, Metteyya will have thousands of followers, where Gotama has but hundreds; this can be taken as a synecdoche for a trope which becomes very much more developed in the later stories of Metteyya: that the life humans lead when he comes will be – although still *dukkha*, unsatisfactory, in the sense of being conditioned and impermanent– very much more enjoyable. Indeed, as the *History of the Future* shows, it will be a constant carnival.

The Story of the Elder Māleyya (*Māleyyadevatthera-vatthu*), in both Pali and vernacular versions, is a very popular text. The monk Māleyya visits the hells, which are luridly described in detail; he also goes to a heaven, where both Sakka, King of the Gods, and the future Buddha live. Metteyya asks him about human life on earth,

and receives from Māleyya the sombre reply (whose truth as a description of our contemporary world I leave to readers' judgment):

> Everyone there lives according to their (past) deeds, rich and poor, happy and unhappy, attractive and unattractive, long lived and short lived. The rich are few, the poor are many; the happy are few, the unhappy many; the attractive are few, the unattractive many; the long lived are few, the short lived many. Human beings are few, there are more animals; that is why I say that everyone lives according to their (past) deeds.

Both *The Lion's Roar on the Wheel-turning King* and *The Story of the Elder Māleyya* say that when the next Buddha, Metteyya, comes, he will not only provide, once again, the salvific truth of the Dhamma; his Enlightenment and founding of a Dispensation will be the crowning achievement of a recovery and regrowth of human civilization from its dire present to a utopian future. Many Buddhist texts describe utopias of this and related kinds, set at various times and in various places. (It is this aspect of the anticipation of future Buddhahood which makes readily understandable the fact that, in real human history, especially in the difficult nineteenth- and twentieth-century conditions of European colonialism and internal nation-state building, there have been millenarian expectations and movements connected with the Metteyya figure in various ways.)

The Lion's Roar is a *Sutta*, in the Canonical Basket of Discourses (*Sutta-piṭaka*); *The Story of the Elder Māleyya* is a non-Canonical 'story' (*vatthu*). As mentioned, the genre in which past and future Buddhas are most extensively described is *vaṃsa*. I now turn to an analysis of two such texts, the Canonical *Chronicle of Buddhas* (*Buddhavaṃsa*), and the non-Canonical family of texts called *The History of the Future* (*Anāgatavaṃsa*). But first: what is a *vaṃsa*?

VAṂSA AS A GENRE

Vaṃsa-s are usually called Histories or Chronicles. (My renderings of *Buddha*- and *Anāgata-vaṃsa* are rather arbitrarily chosen.) Hayden White has usefully distinguished, in Western historiography, three kinds of representation: Annals, Chronicles, and History proper.[2] These categories help in a preliminary way to get a sense of the texts transmitted as *vaṃsa*:

(i) *Annals* merely list events in chronological sequence, without narrative structure.

(ii) *Chronicles* are narratives, but they simply catalogue events, continuing until the Chronicler's own time, when they stop, having run out of material.

(iii) *History* is distinguished from *Chronicles* by its being a structured narrative organized around a guiding theme or topic, and specifically, so it is said, by the presence of narrative closure. Pali *vaṃsa* texts contain examples of both *Chronicle* and *History* forms of representation (and thus the arbitrariness of my renderings of the titles of the two texts discussed here).

Although many of these texts have been edited and translated for a long time, they have received scarcely any study by modern scholars aside from being used by historians as a source of data for their own historiography. Serious and sympathetic investigation of them in and for themselves as a textual genre is more or less non-existent. The term *vaṃsa* (Sanskrit: *vaṃśa*) was used in India for a variety of forms of historical writing from the time of the Brāhmaṇas. In origin, probably, *vaṃsa* texts were genealogical lists; but they came to be expanded into and incorporated in narratives. The original meaning of *vaṃśa* was 'bamboo', and there may be some significance in this: bamboo grows by sending

out one shoot, and one only; unlike our concept of a genealogical tree, therefore, a *vaṃśa* genealogy allows only one legitimate successor at a time. Thus the term not only describes a line of transmission, a lineage, but at the same time ascribes to the members of the *vaṃsa* a specific status and authority as legitimate heirs of that transmission. The Pali *vaṃsa*-s can be seen as part of the wider South Asian literary genre of the *purāṇa*. In the tradition of *purāṇa* writing, two of the traditional five characteristics alleged to be present in any such text are *vaṃśa* and *vaṃśānucarita*; the former refers to a genealogy of gods, patriarchs, kings, and great families, the latter to the deeds of such a *vaṃśa*. Pali *vaṃsa*-s list the genealogy and deeds of the lineage of the Buddha and his heritage, not as a biological family but as a series of interrelated Aspirations and Predictions, stretching infinitely into the past and future.

Many of the *vaṃsa* texts begin from Gotama's former life as Sumedha, when he made the Aspiration to Buddhahood in the presence of the Buddha Dīpaṅkara, from whom he duly received a Prediction. They recount the history of their specific subjects, with prophecies, predictions, and temporal parallels. Texts concerning relics usually end with their being enshrined in a particular place, albeit often after a number of adventures and travels, thus qualifying as History in the sense just defined. Some of the *vaṃsa*-s which do, in Chronicle-style, simply stop at a certain time (either known or presumed to be shortly before they were composed), nonetheless contain accounts of particular kings, which in themselves would qualify as History. The claims I have made about nirvana providing the sense of an ending in both non-repetitive and repetitive time are, I think, true of the whole range of Buddhist literature and ritual; but it is particularly fascinating to see how this appears in the *vaṃsa* texts, in which time is concentratedly textualized. The *vaṃsa* texts – every time they are recited and

retold – recount a linear historical narrative; but in doing so they both express and embody the repetitive interweaving of timeless nirvanized Buddhahood with the texture of all time, past, present, and future.

In *Time and Narrative* Paul Ricoeur argues at length and persuasively that while fictional and historical narratives are indeed different in many ways, both kinds have what he calls the structure of temporality as an ultimate referent. To discuss this theme in fiction he chooses Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, claiming that

> these three works illustrate the distinction … between 'tales of time' and 'tales about time'. All fictional narratives are 'tales of time' inasmuch as the structural transformations that affect the situations and characters take time. However, only a few are 'tales about time' inasmuch as in them it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural transformations.[3]

(One can readily think of other examples: Graham Swift's novel *Waterland*, Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*.) *Vaṃsa*-s are also, often if not always, 'tales about time'. In such cases, one might say, time is not merely an *ultimate* referent of the text, as it is, necessarily, in all narrative texts, but also a *proximate* one. In these texts the passage of both non-repetitive and repetitive time is not merely, so to speak, a canvas on which the (hi)stories are painted, a ground against which events occur as figure, or the stage on which the dramas unfold, but rather is itself an important part of what is portrayed, a figure brought forward for attention and reflection, a character that should be acknowledged in a list of *dramatis personae*.

(I suggest to readers that at this point they read the texts as translated in the Appendices to this chapter before reading my discussion of them.)

VOICE AND TEMPORAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE *CHRONICLE OF BUDDHAS*: REPETITIVE AND NON-REPETITIVE TIME INTERWOVEN

The structure and dynamics of the text as a whole

Although some details clearly suggest that the text as we now have it developed gradually, I shall ignore this and treat *Buddhavaṃsa* as a whole. It begins and ends with an anonymous voice, which may be called that of the Redactor. The first two chapters include verses in direct speech, put into the mouths of various characters, human and divine. Verses 80–1 of chapter I, in the first person singular, are spoken by the Buddha, as are chapters II–XXVII, in both third and first persons singular: according to I 79 his account is derived from his recollection of former lives. In the last chapter, XXVIII, which deals very briefly with the distribution of Gotama's relics, the voice of the anonymous Redactor returns.

The text as a whole tells a story clearly situated in non-repetitive time. The account of Sumedha and Dīpaṅkara in chapter II is situated '100,000 aeons and four incalculable aeons ago' (II 1); the first nine Buddhas only predict that Gotama will become Buddha 'innumerable aeons from now', but from Padumuttara, the tenth, specific decreasing lengths of time are given (XI 12, '100,000 aeons from now'; XII 13, 'after 30,000 aeons', etc.). Such lengths of time are, of course, unacceptable for modern historiography, but I am not concerned with that issue: however incredible such time-specifications may be for modern historians, they nonetheless establish for the text a single and internally coherent enumeration of a non-repetitive temporal sequence. Set in this enumerated sequence of non-repetitive time are accounts of the twenty-four Buddhas preceding Gotama, in chapters II–XXV. Apart

from chapter II, which gives a long account of Sumedha and Dīpaṅkara, the chapters are all of roughly the same length, or rather brevity, being between 24 and 38 verses. Each chapter deals with a different Buddha and is entitled the *vaṃsa* of that Buddha; but both the form and the content of each chapter is exactly parallel, with many passages repeated word for word. Each chapter has three sections (see the translation of chapters III and XX below):

(i) Approximately ten verses giving a third-person account of the Buddha whose tale is being told.
(ii) A first-person account of the person at that time who would eventually be reborn as Gotama. This section includes a standard passage, always in almost identical wording, in which there is a Prediction by the contemporary Buddha of the future Buddhahood of Gotama, an outline sketch of his biography, the names of his family and chief monks, etc. (see III 9–24); it concludes with 'when I had heard his words', and is followed by
(iii) a third-person account (more or less in the form of a list) of the city of the Buddha at that time, the names of his family, chief monks, nuns, male and female lay followers, the species of tree under which he gained Enlightenment, the names of his chief male and female attendants, his height and life-span.

All these chapters end with similar verses referring to the particular Buddha's final nirvana, and then with a mention of the shrine (*cetiya* or *thūpa*; Sanskrit: *caitya*, *stūpa*) built as a memorial to that Buddha.

Chapter XXVI, spoken in the first person by Gotama about himself, is of necessity different; the first and second sections are coalesced, while the third is exactly parallel. This autobiographical

account ends with a reference to his future nirvana; in the version of the text now extant the reference to his relics (and by implication their being installed in *stūpa*-s) is separated out to form the concluding chapter XXVIII. In chapter XXVII, in the text as we now have it, which is scarcely more than a list of names, Gotama refers forward to the next Buddha, Metteyya, in verse 19.

Ignoring for the moment the Buddhas, and chapters, between Dīpaṅkara and Gotama, some of the relevant temporal relationships can be set out as in Table 5.1.

The formulaic biography of Gotama given in the narrated future by Dīpaṅkara in II 60–9 and by each of the Buddhas between Kondañña in III 11–16 and Kassapa in XXV 16–25 is almost exactly identical in each case. Moreover, the biographies of the twenty-four Buddhas given by Gotama in the narrated past are very similar, both to the biography of Gotama they each recount in a narrated future, and to one another. Finally, the autobiography given by Gotama in the narrated present of XXV (especially verses 13–20) has a closely similar form. Thus, taking a sequence of any five Buddhas, one can set out the temporal relationships between possible narratives as in Table 5.2. This table could be extended in either direction, such that what appears here for Buddha 3 would be true of all of them; his formulaic (auto)biography, regardless of whether it is set in narrated past, present, or future, will be identical.

It might seem from what has been said so far that repetitive time is dominant in the *Buddhavaṃsa*, but this is not the case. In the next section I try to show this by close attention to the story of Sumedha, as told by Gotama. But non-repetitive time is emphasized throughout in a variety of ways, notably by a striking simile that appears first in the story of Sumedha and is repeated in every subsequent chapter concerning a past Buddha. When each Buddha has

Table 5.1

	⟵ time ⟶				
	Time of Buddhas and Bodhisattas before Dīpaṅkara	Time of Sumedha and Dīpaṅkara	Time of Gotama Buddha	Time of Redactor (and any recitation); time of narration	Time of Metteyya
Buddha as narrator	pre-narrative past	narrated past	narrated present	implied present of narration	narrated future
For Sumedha and Dīpaṅkara	past referred to as exemplar	narrated present	narrated future	implied present of narration	narrated future
For Gods, etc. in II 81–107, 178–86	past referred to as exemplar	narrated present	narrated future	implied present of narration	narrated future
Redactor and Reciter(s) of extant *Buddhavaṃsa*	⟵ narrated pasts ⟶			implied present of narration	narrated future

Table 5.2

	time ⟶				
narrator	⟵ narrated ⟶				
	Buddha 1	Buddha 2	Buddha 3	Buddha 4	Buddha 5
Buddha 2	past	present	future	future	future
Buddha 3	past	past	present	future	future
Buddha 4	past	past	past	present	future

predicted the future Buddhahood of the contemporary predecessor of Gotama, men and gods exclaim:

72. 'If we fail (to profit from) the Teaching of this Lord of the World [i.e., the contemporary Buddha: in the first case Dīpaṅkara], then at some time in the future may we come face to face with this one [i.e., the contemporary predecessor of Gotama, in the first case Sumedha].
73. 'Just as when people who (are trying to) cross a river (but) fail to reach the opposite bank (at that place, may) reach it further down and so cross the great stream,
74. 'In just the same way if we all let slip (the opportunity offered by) this Conqueror, then at some time in the future may we come face to face with this one.'

While this river image fits in with the ubiquitous Buddhist pattern of the river or ocean of rebirth, contrasted with the further shore of nirvana, in this context it is not merely a general 'river of time' that is contrasted with timeless eternity, but one of non-repetitive time, like Heraclitus' river, here positioning Buddhas and the opportunities for salvation they provide in a linear, irreversible sequence. It is in this non-repetitive river of time that the sequence of lives from Sumedha to Gotama – which we might call an elongated

'biography' – takes place. Just as any single lifetime, as lived and as narrated in (auto)biography traverses annual seasons, days/months of the year, etc., which recur, and proceeds on an individual course through a fixed, pre-given set of stages of life (such as child–parent–grandparent), so the sequence of lives Sumedha → Gotama traverses chapters which have the same form and in which similar content recurs, and proceeds through similarly progressive stages in the sequence from-aspiration-to-fulfillment: that is, the Ten Perfections, the meeting with each Buddha, his prediction of future Buddhahood, etc. So Buddhas, as events in time, repeat the same pattern; but the river of time flows on.

Sumedha and Gotama across time

In these ways, then, both non-repetitive and repetitive time are textualized and foregrounded in the *Buddhavaṃsa* as a whole. Now I turn to chapter II 1–187 in greater detail, to show both how the temporal perspective of the narrative moves back and forth along non-repetitive time, across the multi-lifetime sequence from aspiration to fulfilment; and also how the 'I' of the Buddha, speaking in the narrated present, overlaps and coalesces with the 'I' of Sumedha, speaking, thinking, and acting in the narrated past. These, I contend, are not merely techniques within a given temporal horizon, but means by which temporality itself is made a proximate referent of the text. The coalescing of Sumedha and Gotama is not intended to cancel out time and difference, but is a device to create what I have called the elongated (auto)biography of the person(s) (= stream of consciousness) Sumedha → Gotama, and to show how it passes through a matrix of repetition within non-repetitive, irreversible time. What follows is an analysis of this section of the text in terms of voice and temporal perspective, with remarks on particular verses.

1–5 are spoken by Gotama in the narrated present; Sumedha is introduced by Gotama in the narrated past, in the first person; this use of the first person to describe Sumedha's actions, words, and thoughts continues throughout the text.

6–26 are reflections of Sumedha before becoming an ascetic, in the narrated past, referring to his immediate intentions and longer-term aspirations for future Buddhahood, which are to be fulfilled by Gotama in the narrated present of the text as a whole.

27–58 narrate Sumedha's actions, thoughts, and words, starting with his becoming an ascetic, continuing with regard to then-present Buddha Dīpaṅkara; also included are words of others in direct speech. Sumedha makes the aspiration to become a future Buddha rather than an enlightened Arahant in the then-present, in Dīpaṅkara's Dispensation.

59–69 give Dīpaṅkara's Prediction of Sumedha's future Buddhahood as Gotama [that is, a voice in the narrated past refers to the text's narrated present as its own narrated future].

70–4 report actions and words of 'gods and men'. They introduce the image of the 'river of time': by means of this image their voice, in the text's narrated past, both connects the then-present to their narrated future, the text's narrated present, and keeps them separate.

75–80 tell of the departure of Dīpaṅkara and his monks, and then give Sumedha's thoughts.

81–107 are spoken by gods and men. They delineate a series of portents that happened in the past – that is to say, the pre-narrative past of the text as a whole (the commentary explains that they had seen previous Buddhas and Bodhisattas) – that they see happening 'today' (*ajja*, i.e., their present, the text's narrated past), and on the basis of which they predict future Buddhahood for Sumedha (as Gotama, in the text's narrated present).

108–14 recount thoughts of Sumedha, referring to his future, in the narrated present of Gotama. The verb used in 109–14 in connection with Sumedha-Gotama's Buddhahood is grammatically present; the commentary states that the present tense is used because what is asserted is 'certain, inevitable'; thus I translate, 'I am (to be) a Buddha!' Note that the examples used to show both that what Buddhas [in this case, the Buddha Dīpaṅkara] say is 'always certain' (*dhuvasassataṃ*, which could also be rendered 'assured and eternal'), and that 'assuredly (*dhuvaṃ*) I am (to be) a Buddha' are constancies of nature such as gravity and the sequence of night and day; verse 111 is remarkable, and bears repeating: 'As death is always certain for all beings, so too what is said by (the) excellent Buddhas is always certain – assuredly I am (to be) a Buddha!' So the utter finality of death for each individual in non-repetitive time becomes here one of the eternally repeated phenomena that exemplify the certainty and eternality of what is said by Buddhas. This single verse may perhaps stand as an emblem of the way non-repetitive and repetitive time are interwoven, and balance each other, in this text.

115–65 give the thoughts of Sumedha, in Gotama's first person, as he/they run(s) through the list of Perfections in formulaic manner, adding a simile to each self-exhortation. In verse 115 Sumedha speaks in the first person present tense (for future) 'I (will) contemplate' (*vicināmi*), while in subsequent verses the future form *vicinissāmi* is used. In verse 116 Gotama then gives the reflection in the past tense ('examining, I saw then', *vicinanto tadā dakkhiṃ*, present participle and aorist). The practice and fulfilling of these Perfections, of course, are precisely what fill the time between Sumedha and Gotama.

[A linguistic note: the verbal form standardly called in English the 'aorist tense' is in Pali termed *ajjatanī* (Sanskrit: *adyatanī*), which means literally that it refers to the past earlier today. This is interpreted to mean that the action started in the past but has not yet been completed (i.e., it is not wholly past). This has obvious relevance here.]

166–71 give portents which occurred during Sumedha's contemplation of the Perfections.

172–4 recount Dīpaṅkara's saying that the future Buddha Sumedha/Gotama is reflecting on 'the Dhamma that was followed by former Conquerors'; the commentary reminds us that the Perfections were fulfilled by them in what I am calling the text's pre-narrative past, 'at the time they were future Buddhas (*bodhisattakāle*)', as Sumedha is now resolving to do (in his future).

175–86 recount how gods and men encouraged Sumedha to attain Buddhahood and teach the Dhamma, in the same way as (*yathā* … *tathā*) previous Buddhas.

187 has Gotama conclude the narrated past concerning Sumedha, in what is almost certainly the third-person aorist.

The *Buddhavaṃsa*, then, interweaves non-repetitive and repetitive time constantly throughout the text. One of the most obvious events of non-repetitive time is the closure brought to each Buddha's story by his nirvanizing. Every chapter ends with this, often with the remark: 'Are not all conditioned things worthless?', and with some kind of reflection on impermanence. Thus at Kondañña's nirvanizing in III 37, the text reminds us that 'that Conqueror's supernatural attainment was unequalled, and his (attainment of) meditation was fostered by wisdom: it has all disappeared'; similar sentiments are expressed at the end of almost

every Buddha's life. All of them, like Atthadassi at XV 25, 'came to (an end, because of) impermanence (*aniccataṃ patto*), like a fire at the waning of its fuel'. The river of time flows endlessly on, never turning back, but it provides a temporal location for the individual disappearances of Buddhas and other enlightened beings into timelessness.

THE STORY OF THE ELDER MĀLEYYA AND *THE HISTORY OF THE FUTURE*: UNPRECEDENTED WELL-BEING

In the present state of scholarly knowledge, one can only give a picture of what must be called the family or genre of texts known as *Anāgatavaṃsa*, *The History of the Future*; one such text, in verse and seemingly a complete literary unit, is translated in Appendix 2 at the end of this chapter. There were certainly other versions, some in mixed verse and prose. In the present state of knowledge, it seems that only one future Buddha, Metteyya, was the subject of extended narratives in Pali, as also of ritual activity in South and Southeast Asia (and, indeed, elsewhere). But we do also have two texts, or perhaps rather one text with two current titles, that tell stories of ten future Buddhas, starting with Metteyya. These texts (available in English and French translation)[4] in fact tell the story of those future Buddhas telegrammatically, giving abbreviated lists of the length of their life, etc., with the main part of each account being taken up with stories of their past lives, both before and at the time of our Buddha Gotama. Perhaps here part of the function of perfunctory lists is the reassurance their predictability brings: however bad things are, future Buddhas can be relied on to appear.

Perhaps – again, according to the present state of knowledge – the most popular and widespread textual means in which Buddhists heard about Metteyya is *The Story of the Elder Māleyya*, whose

sombre picture of life at present on earth was cited earlier in this chapter. Māleyya is a monk who visits the Buddhist hells, and then goes to heaven, where he talks with Sakka, King of the Gods, and then the god living there who will be reborn as Metteyya (although he is already given that name in this story) and then attain Buddhahood. The story is intertwined with that of our Buddha Gotama by having the conversations in heaven take place at the shrine (*stūpa*) where a relic of Gotama is kept, the Cūlāmaṇī shrine, which houses the Buddha Gotama's hair, which he cut off when leaving home to embark on his six-year period of 'effort' before becoming enlightened. This is a scene often pictured in temple-paintings; after he has left his horse, Kanthaka (who then dies of a broken heart) and his horseman Channa (who goes on to become a monk under the Buddha, with a rather chequered career), Prince Siddhattha cuts off his long hair with a sword and throws it upwards into the air; Sakka comes down from heaven and catches it, and returns to erect the Cūlāmaṇī shrine. The story gives an extravagant picture of heavenly splendour and happiness, and Sakka gives a glowing – albeit, as the text stresses, inadequate – encomium on the merit acquired by the future Buddha Metteyya, and then Metteyya appears. He asks Māleyya about human beings who produce merit, and those who don't, and then says that people who listen to a recitation of the Birth Story of Vessantara in one day will be reborn at the time of his future Buddahood, but various evil-doers will not. (Vessantara is taken to be the last life as a human being of the series ending in Gotama.) He then predicts the future, at first repeating the story of decline given in the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta* translated above. But then, instead of telling how the resurgence of human life and civilization will develop until a time when the length of life will be 80,000 years, as does the *Sutta*, he goes beyond that. Living for more than 80,000 years has some surprising consequences:

'Then human beings will practise *Dhamma* still more, and they will live for 100,000 years; as they practise *Dhamma* still more, there will be those who live for millions and millions of years; practising *Dhamma* still further than this, they will live for an incalculable amount of time. Then old age and death will not be perceived by (these) beings; and again they will become negligent, and their length of life will diminish. From (having) an incalculable length of life, men will deteriorate and (come to) have a lifetime of millions and millions of years; from then they will gradually deteriorate (until) they have a lifetime of 90,000 years; from then they will gradually deteriorate (until) they have a lifetime of 80,000 years. At that time it will rain (only) in the middle of the night, every fortnight, ten days or five days, increasing the fertility of the earth. The Rose Apple Island [India] will be prosperous (and) continuously filled with flowers, fruits, thickly clustered garlands, and trees; (it will be) crowded with villages and towns (only) a cock's flight (apart), free from thieves and robbers, without (any) grasping at (wrong) views, (and) blazing with royal cities; (it will be) replete with all treasures, happy, with abundant alms food and at peace, replete with great amounts of food and drink, hard and soft food, fish, meat, and the like, prospering with wealth and possessions. The reservoirs will be everywhere filled with beautifully soft water. Then, sir, husbands and wives will enjoy the pleasures of the five senses without arguments or anger; farmers, traders, and the like will live happily without (needing to) work; men and women will not (need to) spin thread or weave the loom, (but) will wear celestial clothes. Men will be content with their wives, and women with their husbands; restrained, men will not commit adultery nor women make another man their husband, (but) they will be loving and pleasant to one another. No one will stir up quarrels because of villages, towns, wealth, crops, fields, property, or soil; all human beings will be handsome, with beautiful bodies, (and will be) loving and pleasant to one another. Crows will become friendly with owls, cats with mice, deer with lions, mongooses with snakes, lions with deer, and so on; in this way all animals that are (usually) enemies will be friendly to one another. Then, from one grain of self growing rice (will come already)husked grains: 2,270 cart loads will be (for them as easily had as) 16 *ambaṇa* measures and 2 *tumba* s. Then I will listen to the entreaty of the gods and Brahmas living in the 10,000 fold world system; I will make the Five Considerations,

(specifying) the time, place, continent, family, and age limit of (my) mother; (and) I will come as Buddha to the human world.'

When he had said this, in order to praise his own perfections [and to show their results for others as well as for himself], he said (in verse):

During 100,000 aeons and sixteen incalculable aeons I fulfilled the perfections variously, acting as a future Buddha excelling in energy, and gave gifts; when I attain omniscience no one will be deformed.

Putting ornaments on my head and ointment on my eyes I gave to beggars for millions and millions of years; when I attain omniscience no human being will be blind.

Ornamenting all parts (of my body) I gave a complete gift; when I attain omniscience no one will be deformed.

I told no lies and did not deceive anyone who asked (me for something); when I attain omniscience no human being will be dumb.

When I heard the Teaching I was glad, and I listened to what supplicants said; when I attain omniscience no human being will be deaf.

I looked at virtuous supplicants with loving eyes; when I attain omniscience no human being will be blind.

With upright body I gave gifts and the like at the proper time; when I attain omniscience no human being will be humpbacked.

I gave beings medicine(s) and got rid of the danger (from disease); when I attain omniscience, then beings will be in good health.

I practised loving kindness, destroying beings' fear and terror; when I attain omniscience, then there will be no Māras.

In a pleasant way I gave pleasing food and drink; when I attain omniscience human beings will be prosperous.

In a pleasant way I gave pleasing clothes; when I attain omniscience human beings will be handsome.

I gave to supplicants pleasing vehicles, elephants, horses, chariots, palanquins, and litters: when I attain omniscience human beings will be happy.

I freed beings from bondage, from hatred and suffering: when I attain omniscience living beings will be free.

I practised loving kindness equally to friend and foe; when I attain omniscience the ground will be even.

I made supplicants happy with food and wealth; when I attain omniscience rivers will be full of cool water.

(Then Metteyya said this:)

When they have done any (act of) merit, human beings, full of fear of rebirth, aspire to (see) me; I will free them from existence. I will cause (them) to cross to the further shore of the world, (this world) whose fearful origin is ignorance, which is entangled in the net of delusion and carried away by the four floods. I (will) teach the way to liberation to those who are smeared with the dirt of defilement, who follow after the thief (that is) craving, and have gone astray in (all) the regions of rebirth; I will teach the way to heaven to beings in the hells (called) Sañjiva, Kāḷasutta, Tāpana, Patāpana, and Avīci. I will cut from (their) bondage beings who are bound by the ties of ignorance and caught in the net of craving, and make them attain nirvana. The City of Nirvana, without old age or death, has a fence of wrong views and a door bolted by the sixty two views; with the key of the Eight fold Path I will open up (this door) for beings. I will give the medicinal stick of wisdom to beings whose sight is spoilt through being covered with the darkness of lust and hatred, and clean their eyes. I will give the excellent medicine of understanding to beings who are sick with grief, who suffer much, and who are oppressed by old age and death, and (so) cure (them). I will suffuse with the light of understanding (the world) with its gods, asuras, and humans, gone astray in the darkness of delusion, and take away the darkness. I will raise from hell those who are falling, helpless and without refuge, into the hells, and show them the way to the further shore.

When he had said this the future Buddha told (the elder): 'Sir, recount to human beings what I have said.' With his shining hands in the form of a hollow lotus bud (made) by putting his ten fingernails together, and putting the shining *añjali* greeting (thus made) firmly to his forehead, (itself) like a well washed plate of gold, he walked around the delightful sapphire Cūlāmaṇī shrine, paid reverence to the eight Directions and made a five fold prostration, and took leave of the elder; escorted by millions and millions of junior gods and goddesses, shining like a full moon, risen to the top of the sky freed from masses of dense cloud (and) surrounded by clusters of stars, he went to Tusita city.

APPENDIX 1: SELECTIONS FROM THE *BUDDHAVAṂSA*

Numbered verses are direct translations. Passages indented within square brackets are summaries.

Chapter 1: The Jewelled Walkway

1. Brahmā Sahampati, the lord of the world, his hands together (reverently, in *añjali*), requested the peerless (Gotama Buddha, in these words): 'There are beings in this world who have but little passion; take pity on them and teach the Doctrine (*Dhamma*).'

[In verses 2 5, Gotama agrees to Brahma Sahampati's request, in the first person singular of direct speech; in 6 63, the Redactor's voice depicts Gotama's making of the jewelled walkway, the arrival of large numbers of gods and other supernaturals, and the joyous scene they create, interspersing various remarks of praise addressed by the gods to the Buddha; then it describes Sāriputta and other of his important monastic followers, who were present. In verses 64 70, the Buddha tells of his previous birth in the Tusita heaven, as a god called Santusita, and subsequent rebirth on earth. In verses 71 8, the Redactor describes how Sāriputta (whose words are given in direct speech) asks the Buddha to recount the story of his resolve to become a Buddha, and his acquisition of the Perfections needed for Buddhahood; and then continues:]

79. By means of his knowledge concerning past lives, for the benefit of the world and its gods he expounded what had been taught about past Buddhas, Conquerors, [as it had been] celebrated and handed down by the lineage of [those] Buddhas.
80. [Gotama Buddha said:] 'Listen to me and pay reverent attention [to my exposition], which brings the attainment of all kinds of success, gives birth to rapture and joy, and removes the barbs of sorrow.
81. 'Follow the Path respectfully, which gets rid of pride, dispels sorrow, liberates [one] completely from rebirth, and destroys all suffering.'

Chapter 2: The Story of Sumedha and the Vaṃsa *of Dīpaṅkara Buddha*

1. 'A hundred thousand [ordinary] aeons and four incalculable aeons ago there was a beautiful and delightful city called Amara ["Immortal"].
2. 'It was always filled with the ten sounds, [such as] those of horses, elephants, drums, conch-shells, and chariots, and was well provided with things to eat and drink, resounding with the cries of those shouting, "Eat! Drink!"
3. 'It was perfect in every respect; (people there were) engaged in all kinds of work; it possessed the seven jewels, (and) was filled with many kinds of people; as opulent as a city of the gods, it was, like heaven, a place where there lived people who had acquired merit.
4. 'In this city of Amarāvatī there was [or: I was – no verb is given] a Brahmin called Sumedha, a millionaire owning vast amounts of money and (stored) grain.
5. 'He [I] was learned, knew the (Vedic) mantras [requisite for the sacrificial ritual], and had mastered the three Vedas; he [I] was an expert in the (sciences of) divination and history and the (other, notably ritual) duties of a Brahmin.
6. 'Seated in private (one day) I thought as follows: "Rebirth and (re) death [lit.: the breaking apart of the body] are (forms of) suffering.
7. '"I, who am subject to birth, old age, and ill-health, will seek for the unaging, undying safety, and peace [of nirvana].
8. '"Why don't I cast aside this filthy body, full of all manner of putrescence, and leave (it/here) indifferent and without care (for it)?
9. '"There is, there must be a Path (to do so) – it cannot not be! I will seek that Path for the sake of liberation from [conditioned] existence.

10. '"Just as (it is the case that) when suffering is found, happiness is also, so when [conditioned] existence is found, one can look for non-existence.
11. '"Just as when heat is found, so, on the other hand, is coolness, so when the three-fold fire [of lust, hatred, and delusion] is found, one can look for (its) quenching (*nibbāna*).
12. '"Just as when what is bad exists, what is good ['wholesome', *kusala*] does also, so when birth is found, one can look for that which is without birth.
13. '"Just as when a person is smeared with excrement, and (though) he or she sees a pool full (of water) does not seek (to wash in) that pool, this is not a fault in the pool,
14. '"so when the pool of Immortality exists to clean the smearing of defilement, if one does not seek that pool this is not a fault in the pool of Immortality.
15. '"Just as when someone is surrounded by enemies, and there does exist a way to escape, but he or she does not (take it to) run away, that is no fault in the path,
16. '"so when one is surrounded by the defilements, and there is an auspicious path (by which to escape), but one does not seek that path, this is not a fault in the auspicious way.
17. '"Just as when a person is ill, and a doctor is there (to treat him), but he or she does not ask for treatment, this is not a fault in the doctor,
18. '"so when one is suffering and oppressed by the disease of defilement, (but) does not seek the Teacher, that is not a fault in (that) Preceptor.
19. '"Just as if a person were to be disgusted at (having) a corpse hung from his neck, and were to free himself (from it) and go away happy, free, and his or her own master,

20. '"so I will cast aside this filthy body (which is just) a heap of various kinds of putrescence and leave (it/here), indifferent and without care (for it).
21. '"Just as men and women cast aside excrement in a latrine and go away indifferent and without care (for it),
22. '"so in the same way I will cast aside this body, full of all manner of putrescence, and go away, as if I had defecated (and gone away from) a toilet.
23. '"Just as the owners of an old, broken, and leaking boat cast it aside and go their way indifferent and without care (for it),
24. '"so in the same way I will cast aside this body with its nine holes, constantly dripping, and go my way, like the owners of the broken boat.
25. '"Just as a person travelling with merchandise and (accompanied by) dishonest men [lit.: thieves] might see that there was a danger that the merchandise would be divided up (among them), and (so) part company with them and go on his way,
26. '"so in the same way this body is like a great thief and I will part company with it and go on my way, out of fear that (my store of) what is good might be destroyed."
27. 'With these things in mind I gave away many millions' worth of wealth, to rich and poor alike, and went off to the Himālayas.'

[Gotama then describes, still in Sumedha's first person singular, the various advantages of a well built meditation walkway, of living in a hermitage, etc.; and recounts his supernatural attainments. He continues:]

34. 'While I was thus acquiring (supernatural) attainments, and gaining mastery in ascetic practice, the Conqueror Dīpaṅkara appeared, the Leader of the World.

35. 'Given over to the bliss of meditation, I did not see the four signs of (Dīpaṅkara's) conception, birth, Enlightenment, and teaching *Dhamma* (in the First Sermon).
36. '(People) in a border-country invited the Tathāgata (Dīpaṅkara), and, delighted by (the thought of) his visit, were clearing the road.
37. 'At that time I went out from my own hermitage, and with bark garment rustling (in the wind) I flew through the air.
38. 'Seeing the people full of joy, delighted, happy, and elated, I came down from the sky and straight away asked them:
39. '"(You) people are delighted, happy, elated, and full of joy. For whom is the road being cleared?"
40. 'They replied to my question: "A Supreme Buddha has appeared in the world, a Conqueror named Dīpaṅkara, a Leader of the World – (it is) for him (that) the road is being cleared."
41. 'When I heard the word "Buddha", rapture arose in me and I expressed (my) joy, saying, "Buddha, Buddha."
42. 'Standing there, happy and thrilled in mind, I thought: "Here I will sow the seeds [of future Buddhahood]; may my moment not pass (me by)!"
43. '[I said to them:] "If you are clearing (the road) for the Buddha, give me one place, (so that) I too will clear (his) path."
44. 'They gave me a place to clear the road, and I cleared it, thinking, "Buddha, Buddha!"
45. 'My section was unfinished when the Great Sage Dīpaṅkara, the Conqueror, entered the path with 400,000 excellent, stainless Arahants, who had attained the Six Super-knowledges.
46. 'Many gods and men were on their way to meet him, banging drums, rejoicing, and crying, "Sādhu ('Good')!"
47. 'Gods saw humans and humans saw gods; with hands together (in *añjali*) they followed the Tathāgata.

48. 'The gods made music on (their) celestial instruments, (as did) the humans on (their) human instruments; (doing so) together, they followed after the Tathāgata.
49. 'From mid-way in the sky, gods scattered down celestial mandārava flowers, lotuses, and flowers from the Pāricchattaka tree [in the Tusita heaven] in all directions,
50. 'Men on the earth threw aloft flowers from the Campaka, Saḷala, Nīpa, Nāga, Punnāga, and Ketaka trees.
51. 'Loosening my hair I spread out my bark garment and animal skin (right) there in the mud and lay face downwards.
52. '"Let the Buddha and his pupils walk on me; may he not step in the mud – this will be to my benefit."
53. 'As I lay there on the ground this thought occurred to me: "If I wanted to I could burn up my defilements today.
54. '"But what's the point (or: use) of my realizing the Truth (*Dhamma*) here (and now) in disguise [*aññāta-vesena*, lit.: in unrecognized appearance]? I will attain omniscience and become a Buddha in (the world) with its gods.
55. '"What's the point/use of my crossing over, just one person seeing (only my own) strength? I will attain omniscience and carry (others) across, (in the world) with its gods.
56. '"By this resolution I have made (in the presence of) him who is unsurpassed among men, I will attain omniscience and cause many people to cross over.
57. '"Cutting the stream of rebirth, destroying the three existences, I will board the ship of the Truth (*Dhamma*) and carry (others) across, (in the world) with its gods."
58. 'Existence as a human being, male gender, the (right) cause, seeing a Teacher [= a Buddha], being an ascetic, having the requisite qualities, (making a) resolution, the fact of (having)

determination: by putting together these eight things an aspiration (to Buddhahood: *abhinīhāra*) succeeds.

59. 'Dīpaṅkara, the knower of the world(s) and recipient of (its) offerings, stood at my head and spoke these words:

60. '"Do you see this ascetic, this great matted-hair ascetic? Countless aeons from now he will be a Buddha in (this) world.

61. '"One day the (future) Tathāgata will leave a delightful city by the name of Kapila, and will strive the (great) striving, and do what is hard to do;

62. '"Sitting down at the foot of an Ajapāla tree the (future) Tathāgata will accept (a meal of) milk-rice there, and (then) go to the (river) Nerañjarā.

63. '"This (future) Conqueror will eat the milk-rice on the bank of the Nerañjarā, and (then) go to the foot of the Enlightenment tree along an excellent, decorated road.

64. '"There he will circumambulate his Enlightenment throne, and (then) seated at the foot of the Assattha tree, that unsurpassed One, of great renown, will attain Enlightenment.

65. '"The mother who will give birth to him will be called Māyā, his father Suddhodana; he will be called Gotama.

66. '"The two Chief Male Disciples will be called Kolita and Upatissa, who will be free from Corruptions, passionless, calm in mind, and concentrated.

67. '"An attendant called Ānanda will serve this/that Conqueror, and the two Chief Female Disciples will be Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā,

68. '"who will (also) be free from Corruptions, passionless, calm in mind, and concentrated. The Enlightenment-tree will be called an Assattha.

69. '"The two chief male (lay) attendants will be Citta and Hatthāḷavaka; the two chief female (lay) attendants will be Uttarā and Nandamātā."

70. 'When they heard these words from the unequalled Great Sage, men and gods rejoiced, (saying): "Here is a sprout (from which will come a) Buddha!"
71. 'A great outcry was heard, (as) beings and gods (throughout) the 10,000-fold world-system clapped their hands, laughed, and made obeisance [to Sumedha] with hands together (in *añjali*), (saying):
72. '"If we fail (to profit from) the Teaching of this Lord of the World [i.e., Dīpaṅkara], then at some time in the future may we come face to face with this one [i.e., Sumedha, as Gotama].
73. '"Just as when people who (are trying to) cross a river (but) fail to reach the opposite bank (at that place, may) reach it further down and so cross the great stream,
74. '"in just the same way if we all let slip (the opportunity offered by) this Conqueror [Dīpaṅkara], then at some time in the future may we come face to face with this one [Sumedha, as Gotama]."
75. 'Dīpaṅkara, the knower of the world(s) and recipient of (its) offerings, praised my deed and raised his right foot (to go).
76. 'All the sons [= disciples] of that Conqueror made a ritual circumambulation [of my body as it lay there], (while) gods, men, and Asuras saluted me and departed.
77. 'When the leader of the world and his (monastic) Order were out of sight, I got up from where I was lying and sat cross-legged [in the lotus position].
78. 'I was filled (to overflowing) with happiness and joy, and sat cross-legged in a state of rapture.
79. 'Sitting cross-legged I had this thought: "I have mastered (the Levels of) meditation, and have attained complete Super-knowledge.
80. '"There is no sage equal to me in the (10,)000-fold world (-system); unequalled in (psychic) Power I have attained such happiness (as this)."

81. 'As I sat cross-legged, all those who dwelt in the 10,000-fold world-system let out a great shout: "Assuredly you will be a Buddha!
82. '"All the portents that appeared when past future Buddhas sat cross-legged [in this way, after making their Resolution], are seen today:
83. '"cold disappeared and heat abated (then); these (portents) are seen today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
84. '"The 10,000-fold world-system was quiet and untroubled; these (portents) are seen today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
85. '"No great winds blew, rivers did not flow; these (portents) are seen today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
86. '"Flowers growing in water and on land all came into flower at that moment; they are all in flower today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
87. '"Creepers or trees bore fruit at that moment; they all bear fruit today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
88. '"Jewels shone in the sky and on the ground at that moment; they are shining today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
89. '"Human and divine musical instruments played at that moment; they are playing today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
90. '"Various flowers rained down from the sky at that moment; they appear today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
91. '"The great ocean receded, and the 10,000-fold (world-system) quaked; they both resound today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
92. '"The 10,000 fires in hell were quenched (*nibbanti*) at that moment; these fires are quenched today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!

93. '"The sun was stainless [i.e., shining brightly] and [nonetheless] all the stars were seen; they are seen today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
94. '"Water came up from the earth at that moment, although it had not rained; it comes up from the earth today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
95. '"Masses of stars and constellations lit up the whole of the sky; Visākhā is (again) in conjunction with the moon – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
96. '"(Animals) living in holes and in caves came out from their lairs; today their lairs are empty – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
97. '"No-one was disconsolate, but (all) were contented at that moment; today all are contented (again) – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
98. '"Illnesses were cured, hunger came to an end; today these things are seen (again) – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
99. '"There was little lust, (while) hatred and delusion were destroyed; these things are all absent today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
100. '"There was no fear then, and this is seen (again) today; by this sign we know – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
101. '"No dust was stirred up (then), and this is seen again today; by this sign we know – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
102. '"Undesirable smells went away, and a divine scent wafted around; that scent wafts around today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
103. '"All the gods can be seen, apart from those without form; all are seen today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
104. '"Everything was seen at that moment, as far as the Niraya hell; it is (all) seen today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!

105. '"Walls, doors, and rocks were not obstacles then; today they are (again) like (empty) space – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
106. '"At that (same) moment, there was no dying or being reborn; these things are seen today – assuredly you will be a Buddha!
107. '"Apply yourself vigorously, don't let (your) energy fail, press forward; we know this: assuredly you will be a Buddha!"
108. 'When I had heard what was said both by the Buddha (Dīpaṅkara) and by those who dwelt in the 10,000-fold world-system, I was happy, contented, joyous; and I thought:
109. '"What Buddhas say has but one (sure) meaning; Conquerors do not speak falsely. There is no falsehood in Buddhas – assuredly I am (to be) a Buddha!
110. '"As a clod of earth thrown up to the sky is certain to fall back to earth, so too what is said by (the) excellent Buddhas is always certain – assuredly I am (to be) a Buddha!
111. '"As death is always certain for all beings, so too what is said by (the) excellent Buddhas is always certain – assuredly I am (to be) a Buddha!
112. '"As when the night is ending the sun always rises, so too what is said by (the) excellent Buddhas is always certain – assuredly I am (to be) a Buddha!
113. '"As a lion who leaves his den always roars, so too what is said by (the) excellent Buddhas is always certain – assuredly I am (to be) a Buddha!
114. '"Just as a pregnant woman is sure to be relieved of her burden, so too what is said by (the) excellent Buddhas is always certain – assuredly I am (to be) a Buddha!"'

[In verses 115 65 Gotama, still speaking in Sumedha's first person, says: 'Now I (will) contemplate the things that make one a Buddha,' and goes through the Ten Perfections. For each perfection he begins: 'In con templation then I saw …', urges himself to action in second person

imperatives, and gives a simile. A repeated verse connects each Perfection with the next: 'But this is not all there is to Buddhahood … I will contemplate other things that ripen to Enlightenment.' The first Perfection is translated in full below, and then the others are listed with a summary version of the self admonition and simile.]

116. 'In contemplation then I saw the first Perfection, that of *Giving*, the great path followed by the Great Sages of old.

117. '"Be firm! Take up this first, and set off towards to the Perfection of Giving, if you want to attain Enlightenment!

118. '"As a pot full of water when turned upside down by anyone discharges its water and keeps nothing back,

119. '"so you in the same way, when you see a suppliant of low, high, or middle standing, give gift(s) and keep nothing back, like an upturned pot."'

[*The Perfection of Morality*: guard morality as a female yak with her tail caught in something will die rather than damage her tail.

Renunciation: see all forms of existence as a prison, and rather than develop desire for it, long to escape as does a suffering prisoner.

Wisdom: seek wisdom everywhere as a monk goes for alms to all, without discriminating.

Energy: be energetic in every life as a lion is full of energy in any position, lying down, standing, or walking.

Patience: be patient when shown respect or not, as the earth accepts whatever is thrown on it, pure or impure.

Truth: never go beyond the path of the (Four) Truths, as the star Osadhī never strays from its path, whatever the time or the season.

Determination: be constantly resolute, as a rock stays in place without trembling, even in high winds.

Loving Kindness: develop loving kindness (or friendliness, *mettā*) for friend and enemy alike, as water refreshes and cleans good and bad people alike.

Equanimity: remain balanced in happiness or suffering, as the earth remains indifferent to the purity and impurity put on it.]

166. [Gotama continues:] 'As I [= Sumedha] meditated on these things, (in) their essential nature and their characteristics, through the splendour and power of the *Dhamma* the earth and the 10,000-fold (world-system) quaked.
167. 'The earth moved and roared like a sugar-cane press when pressure is applied; it shook like the wheel in an oil press.
168. 'The whole assembly present at the alms-giving to the Buddha (Dīpaṅkara) fell to the ground and lay there, faint and trembling.
169. 'Many thousands of water-jars and many hundreds of water-pots smashed against one another and were shattered and broken.
170. 'The people were frightened, full of fear; afraid, staggering, they came together and went to Dīpaṅkara (saying):
171. '"What will there be for the world, (something) good or bad? The whole world is assailed. As one Who Sees, remove this [trouble, fear, etc.]."
172. 'The Great Sage Dīpaṅkara won them over (by saying) "Have confidence; don't be frightened by this earthquake.
173. '"The person of whom today I made the declaration 'He will be a Buddha in the world' is contemplating the *Dhamma* followed by Conquerors of old.
174. '"While he has been contemplating the *Dhamma*, the whole ground of Buddhas in its entirety, the earth has, accordingly, quaked in the 10,000-fold (world-system) along with its gods."
175. 'Their minds were calmed instantly on hearing the Buddha's words; everyone then came to me to do me honour.

176. 'After undertaking (to acquire) the qualities of a Buddha [= the Perfections], I did obeisance to Dīpaṅkara and got up from my seat.
177. 'Gods and men both scattered flowers, divine and human, as I got up from my seat.
178. 'They both, gods and men, made a blessing for safety: "May you attain the great thing to which you have made an aspiration, as you wish.
179. '"May you avoid all calamities, may grief and illness be destroyed; let there be no hindrance – be quick to attain the highest Enlightenment!
180. '"As flowering trees flower when the time has come, may you also, great hero, flower with the knowledge of Enlightenment!
181. '"As all those who were Perfect Buddhas (in the past) fulfilled the Ten Perfections, may you also, great hero, fulfil the Ten Perfections!
182. '"As all the Perfect Buddhas (of the past) became enlightened on the throne of Enlightenment, may you also become enlightened in the Conqueror's Enlightenment!
183. '"As all the Perfect Buddhas (of the past) turned the Wheel of the *Dhamma*, may you also, great hero, turn the Wheel of the *Dhamma*!
184. '"As the moon shines pure on a full moon night, may you also, (your aspiration) fulfilled, shine in the 10,000-fold (world-system)!
185. '"As the sun, freed from Rāhu, blazes with light, may you also, freed from the world, blaze brightly!
186. '"Just as whatever streams there are flow down to the great sea, may the worlds and their gods flow down to you!"
187. 'Praised and gladdened by them, taking on the Ten (Perfections), he went into the forest to practise them.'

Chapter 3: The Vaṃsa *of Kondañña Buddha*

1. ‘Next after Dīpaṅkara there was a leader called Kondañña: his brilliance was endless, his glory unlimited; he was immeasurable and unassailable.
2. ‘His patience was like the earth, his virtue(s) like the ocean, his (meditative) concentration like Mount Meru, his wisdom like the sky.’

[There follow various verses of narrative about and praise for Kondañña, using standard phrases.]

9. ‘At that time I was the warrior-noble Vijitāvī (‘Victor’), wielding power from one end of the ocean to the other.
10. ‘I gave excellent food to the millions and millions of faultless Great Sages, along with the Leader of the World.
11. ‘The Leader of the World, the Buddha Kondañña, predicted of me: “He will be Buddha in the world innumerable aeons from now.
12. ‘“He will make the (Great) Effort, do what is hard to do, and will attain Complete Enlightenment at the foot of an Assattha tree, (and so become) of great renown.
13. ‘“The mother who will give birth to him will be called Māyā; his father will be Suddhodana, and he will be called Gotama.
14. ‘“Kolita and Upatissa will be his Chief Male Disciples; an attendant called Ānanda will serve this/that Conqueror.
15. ‘“Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā will be his Chief Female Disciples; his Tree of Enlightenment will be called an Assattha.
16. ‘“The two chief male (lay) attendants will be Citta and Hatthāḷavaka; the two chief female (lay) attendants will be Uttarā and Nandamātā. The life span of this/that renowned Gotama will be 100 years.”

17. ‘When they heard these words from the unequalled great Seer, men and gods rejoiced, (saying): “Here is a sprout (from which will come a) Buddha!”
18. ‘A great outcry was heard, (as) beings and gods (throughout) the 10,000-fold world-system clapped their hands, laughed, and made obeisance [to Vijitāvī] with hands together (in *añjali*), (saying):
19. ‘“If we fail (to profit from) the Teaching of this Lord of the World [i.e., Kondañña], then at some time in the future may we come face to face with this one [i.e., Vijitāvī, as Gotama].
20. ‘“Just as when people who (are trying to) cross a river (but) fail to reach the opposite bank (at that place may) reach it further down and so cross the great stream,
21. ‘“in just the same way if we all let slip (the opportunity offered by) this Conqueror [Kondañña], then at some time in the future may we come face to face with this one [Vijitāvī, as Gotama].”
22. ‘When I heard these words my heart grew even more confident. In order to bring that aim [i.e., Buddhahood] to fulfilment I offered my great kingdom to that Conqueror; I gave up my great kingdom and became a renouncer in his presence.
23. ‘I learnt (by heart) the *Sutta* and *Vinaya*, the nine-fold instruction of that Teacher, and so illumined the Dispensation of that Conqueror.
23. ‘Living there diligently, whether sitting, standing or walking, I perfected the (supernatural) Knowledges and (at death) went to the Brahma-world.
25. ‘Kondañña’s city was called Rammavatī; the warrior-noble (his father) was Sunanda; the mother who gave him birth was called Sujātā.
26. ‘He lived the household life for 10,000 years; his three excellent palaces were Ruci, Suruci, and Subha.

27. '(He had) 300,000 attractive women (as wives); his (chief) wife was called Rucidevī and his son was called Vijitasena.
28. 'He saw the four Sights and left (home) in a chariot; that Conqueror made the (Great) Effort for fully ten months.
29. 'When he was requested (to preach) by Brahma, Kondañña the Great Hero, the best of two-footed creatures, turned the Wheel (of *Dhamma*) in the excellent city of the gods.
30. 'Bhadda and Subhadda were his Chief Male Disciples, Anuruddha was the attendant of Kondañña the Great Sage.
31. 'Tissā and Upatissā were his Chief Female Disciples; the Enlightenment tree of Kondañña the Great Sage was Sālakalyāṇikā.
32. 'His two chief male (lay) attendants were Citta and Hatthāḷavaka; the two chief female (lay) attendants Nandā and Sirimā.
33. 'The Great Sage was 88 feet [lit.: hands] tall; he shone like the king of the stars [i.e., the moon], (or) like the sun at midday.
34. 'A (normal human) life-span at that time was 100,000 years; he lived that long and caused many people to cross [i.e., to the further shore, nirvana].
35. 'The earth was adorned with faultless Ones whose corruptions were destroyed; it shone (with their beauty) as the (roof of the) sky (shines) with the stars.
36. 'Those immeasurable, imperturbable, unassailable Nāgas of great renown made themselves look like bolts of lightning when they attained (final) nirvana.
37. 'That Conqueror's supernatural attainment was unequalled, and his (attainment of) meditation was fostered by wisdom; it has all disappeared: are not all conditioned things worthless?
38. 'The fine Buddha Kondañña attained (final) nirvana in the Canda park; an ornamented shrine (*cetiya*) was erected there, 7 miles high.'

Chapter 20: The Vaṃsa *of Vipassī Buddha*

1. ‘Next after Phussa a Perfect Buddha called Vipassī arose in the world, the best of two-footed creatures, endowed with (enlightened) vision.
2. ‘When he had broken through all (forms of) ignorance and attained the ultimate, Perfect Enlightenment he set out for the city of Bandhumatī to turn the Wheel of the *Dhamma*.’

[There follow various verses of narrative about and praise for Vipassī, using standard phrases, similar to those used of Konda*nn*a.]

10. ‘At that time I was a Nāga-king called Atula [“Incomparable”], of great supernatural powers, an illustrious maker of merit.
11. ‘I went up to the Most Senior in the world, and surrounded him with many millions of Nāgas playing (music) on celestial instruments.
12. ‘Approaching the Perfect Buddha Vipassī, the Leader of the World, I invited the King of the *Dhamma* to accept my gift of a golden throne inlaid with precious stones, pearls, and (other) jewels.
13. ‘Sitting among his Monastic Community the Buddha predicted of me: “He will be a Buddha in ninety-one aeons from now.”’

[Verses 14 21 are almost word for word identical with chapter 2 verses 61 8, translated above, said by the Buddha Dīpaṅkara of Sumedha.]

22. ‘When I heard these words my heart grew even more confident. I strengthened yet further my resolution to attain the Ten Perfections.
23. ‘The Great Sage Vipassī’s city was called Bandhumatī; the warrior-noble (his father) was Bandhumā; his mother was Bandhumatī.

24. 'He lived the household life for 8,000 years; his three excellent palaces were Nanda, Sunanda, and Sirimā.
25. '(He had) forty-three attractive women (as wives); his (chief) wife was called Sutanā and his son was called Samavattakhandha.
26. 'He saw the four Sights and left (home) in a chariot; that Conqueror made the (Great) Effort for fully eight months.
27. 'When he was requested (to preach) by Brahma, Vipassī the Great Hero, the best of men, turned the Wheel (of *Dhamma*) in a deer-park.
28. 'Khandha and Tissa were his Chief Male Disciples; Asoka was the attendant of the Great Sage Vipassī.
29. 'Candā and Candamittā were his Chief Female Disciples; the Enlightenment tree of the Blessed One was called the Pāṭālī.
30. 'His two chief male (lay) attendants were Punabbasumitta and Nāga; the two chief female (lay) attendants Sirimā and Uttamā.
31. 'The Leader of the World was 88 feet tall; his radiance spread out for 7 miles all around him.
32. 'The Buddha's life-span at that time was 80,000 years; he lived that long and caused many people to cross (to nirvana).
33. 'He released many gods and men from their bonds, and showed the remaining ordinary ones what was the Path and what was not the Path.
34. 'He showed (people) the light, and taught the Path to the Deathless; blazing up like a mass of fire he attained nirvana [lit.: was quenched, *nibbuto*) along with his disciples.
35. '(His) excellent supernatural powers, merit, (his knowledge of) the characteristics of (all) four Levels – they have all disappeared: are not all conditioned things worthless?
36. 'Vipassī, the excellent conqueror, the steadfast, attained nirvana in the Sumitta park; right there an excellent 7-mile-high *stūpa* (was built) for him.'

APPENDIX 2: THE *ANĀGATAVAṂSA*

1. The very wise Sāriputta, (also called) Upatissa the leader, the resolute Captain of the Teaching, went to the Lord of the World
2. and told him of his uncertainty on the matter of the future Conqueror: 'The next wise Buddha – what is he going to be like?
3. 'You have eyes (to see such matters): tell me, I want to hear (the story) in full!' The Blessed One listened to what the elder said, and replied:
4. 'No-one can recount completely the full (story) of Ajita's (= Metteyya's] great and widely renowned mass of merit. Listen while I recount just a part (of it), Sāriputta.
5. 'In this Auspicious Aeon, millions of years in the future, there will indeed arise a Perfectly Enlightened One called Metteyya, the best of (all) two-footed beings,
6. 'with great merit, great wisdom, great knowledge great renown, great strength, great vigour, with eyes (to see the Truth).
7. 'That Conqueror will arise, with a great destiny, mindful, steadfast, of profound knowledge: he will examine all things, know them, see them, thoroughly touch [i.e., experience] them, enter deeply into them and Saṅkha will raise up this palace then.
8. 'At that time the royal city will be called Ketumatī, 12 leagues long and 7 wide,
9. 'crowded with men and women, resplendent with palaces, frequented by pure beings, invincible, and rightly protected.
10. '(There will be) a king called Saṅkha; with a limitless army, he will be a mighty Wheel-turning king provided with the seven precious things;
11. 'with magic powers, famous, possessing all objects of desire, he will rule (his kingdom) righteously, in peace, all enemies destroyed.

12. ‘A well-built palace will arise there through his meritorious deeds, like a celestial palace (*vimāna*), decorated with various precious things,
13. ‘encircled by railings, well laid out, delightful, excellent, tall, and shining (so brightly that it will be) hard to look at, dazzling the eyes;
14. ‘King Saṅkha will raise up this palace, which belonged to King Mahāpanāda, and live in it.
15. ‘At that time there will be various streets in this city, here and there, (leading to) delightful, well-constructed, and easily accessible lotus ponds
16. ‘whose clear, pellucid water will be pleasantly cool and fragrant, with sand strewn on their even banks and filled to the brim
17. ‘covered with red and blue lotuses, open (to everyone) all year round. There will be seven rows of palm-trees, and seven-coloured walls
18. ‘made of precious things surrounding the city on all sides. The royal city (now called) Kusāvatī is going to be Ketumatī then;
19. ‘there will be a set of four glistening wishing-trees at the (four) city gates, blue, yellow, red, and white.
20. ‘Divine clothes and ornaments will arise, all (kinds of) wealth and possessions will hang there.
21. ‘Then, in the city centre, there will be a square with four halls, facing the four directions, and a wishing-tree, arising through meritorious deeds.
22. ‘Cotton, silk, linen and fine Kodumbara cloth will hang from these wishing-trees,
23. ‘(as will) musical instruments, tambourines, hand drums and (deep-sounding) drums,

24. ‘(and also) bracelets, arm-rings, and necklaces made of precious things,
25. ‘(and also) tiaras, jewels for the brow, bracelets, and jewelled girdles,
26. ‘(and also) all manner of other jewellery and ornaments.
27. ‘Through (the) people’s meritorious action, they will eat pure, fragrant rice, which will grow through self-generation, not cultivation, without powder, (already) husked and ready to eat.
28. ‘Two thousand two hundred and seventy cartloads will be (for them as easily had as) a sixteenth of an *ambaṇa* (is now).
29. ‘And then, what is called (now) two *tumba*-measures of husked rice will grow from a single seed, through the people’s meritorious action.
30. ‘The people who live in Ketumatī, in Saṅkha’s realm, will then wear (golden) armour and arm-rings,
31. ‘their (every) wish will be fulfilled, they will have happy faces (and) heavy earrings, their bodies will be anointed with yellow sandal-wood, and they will wear Benares’ finest (cloth).
32. ‘They will have many possessions, (be) wealthy, awaken to (the sound of) *vīṇā*-s and gongs; they will be continuously and extremely happy (both) physically and mentally.
33. ‘Jambudīpa, over (all) its 10,000-league length, will be without thorns, unentangled, with grass in abundance.
34. ‘There will be (only) three diseases: desire [*icchā*, wants], lack of food, and old age. Women will marry at the age of 500.
35. ‘(People then) will live in harmony and friendship, always without quarrels; creepers, bushes, and trees will be covered in fruit and flowers.
36. ‘There will be a kind of grass, as soft as cotton, (that grows only) 4 inches high, and a gentle breeze bringing regular rainfall, neither too cold not too hot.

37. 'There will be always be good weather, the reservoirs and rivers will be full, and in (various) places here and there smooth, pure sand will be strewn around, like pearls the size of peas and beans.
38. 'The crowded villages and cities here and there will be as pleasant as an ornamented garden, so close (to one another that),
39. 'like a thicket of reeds or bamboo, they will be (just) a cock's flight (apart); (they will be) as full of people, I think, as the Avīci hell.
40. '(There will be) cities densely packed with people, rich, prosperous, and safe, free from disease and distress.
41. 'There will be constant pleasure and amusement; and people will wander around delightedly (as if) in a (constant) festival, experiencing perpetual happiness.
42. 'Jambudīpa will be as pleasant as the broad royal city of the Kurus or Ālakamandā, (the city) of the gods, which have much food and drink, much feasting, much meat and liquor.
43. 'He who is named Ajita will be named Metteyya, best of (all) two-footed beings, endowed with the thirty-two (Major) Characteristics, as well as the (eighty) Minor Marks,
44. 'with a golden complexion, without stain, very splendid, shining with the utmost splendour, beautiful, handsome, good to look at,
45. 'mighty, unequalled – he will be born in a Brahmin family, extremely wealthy and rich, from one of the best families. Unreproachable with respect to birth, he will be born into a Brahmin family,
46. 'There will be four palaces made of precious things for Ajita to use, (called) Sirivaḍḍha, Vaḍḍhamāna, Siddhattha, and Candaka.
47. 'Ajita will have female attendants with perfect bodies, adorned with all kinds of ornaments, large, medium, and small,

48. ‘no fewer than 100,000 bejewelled women. His (chief) wife will be Candamukhī, and his son Brahmavaddhana.
49. ‘He will take his pleasure, (and be) abounding in pleasure, rejoicing in great happiness; enjoying all (kinds of) splendour like Sakka in the Nandana Grove,
50. ‘he will live in a house for 8,000 years. Then one day, going out amuse himself in a garden, seeking pleasure,
51. ‘he will be wise and see the danger in sense-desires – (as is in) the nature of Future Buddhas – when he sees the four signs that destroy desire and pleasure [*kāma*, *rati*, sexual-sensual]:
52. ‘an old person, a sick person, a corpse bereft of life, and a renouncer (looking) happy. Feeling compassion for all beings,
53. ‘dissatisfied with desire and pleasure, no (longer) expecting great happiness (therein), he will go forth [i.e., become a renouncer], seeking the supreme place of peace.
54. ‘This unsurpassed man will undertake the practice of Effort for seven days; the Conqueror will go forth, jumping up (into the air) with a (*vimāna*-)palace.
55–6. ‘Ajita will go forth, at the head of a great body of people: friends, colleagues, companions, relatives, the four parts of the army, four assemblies of the four classes, and 84,000 princesses.
57. ‘When Metteyya goes forth, then 84,000 Brahmins, experts in the Veda, will (also) go forth.
58. ‘Both the brothers Isidatta and Purāṇa, and 84,000 (others), will go forth then.
59. ‘From (among that) 84,000, Jātimitta and Vijaya, a pair of boundless intelligence, will serve the Perfectly Enlightened One;
60. ‘(as likewise) will the head of household Suddhika and the laywoman Sudhanā,

61. ‘(and also) the layman Saṅgha and laywoman Saṅghā,
62. ‘and the head of household Suddhika and he who is renowned as Sudatta.
63. ‘The woman Yasavatī and she who is renowned as Visākhā, at the front of 84,000 men and women,
64. ‘will go forth as renouncers in Metteyya’s Dispensation. Other townspeople and many people from the countryside, more than a few *kṣatriya*-s, Brahmins, *vaiśya*-s and *śūdra*-s,
65. ‘many people from various castes, turned towards renunciation, will then adopt the homeless life in emulation of Metteyya.
66. ‘On the day when, resolute, he makes his renunciation, on that very renunciation-day he will go to the Seat of Enlightenment;
67. ‘very splendid, he will sit down cross-legged on the supreme Enlightenment Seat, the place of the invincible (One), and he will attain Enlightenment.
68. ‘The Conqueror will go to the fine garden (called) Nāgavana and set in motion the supreme Wheel of the *Dhamma*:
69. ‘suffering, the arising of suffering, the overcoming of suffering, and the Noble Eight-fold Path which leads to the allaying of suffering.
70. ‘Then, when the Lord of the World has set in motion the Wheel of the *Dhamma*, there will be people for 100 leagues on every side (as his) assembly.
71. ‘Many gods, in even greater numbers, will come to the Conqueror there, and at that time he will release millions upon millions of them from their bonds.
72. ‘Then King Saṅkha will offer his precious palace to the Community of Monks headed by the Conqueror, and moreover
73. ‘will give many gifts to the poor, to travellers and to beggars, (and) will hurry to the Buddha, together with his queen;

74. ‘having a limitless army, through the power of his great royal merit, he will go to the Conqueror along with millions upon millions of people.
75. ‘Then the Perfectly Enlightened One will beat the excellent *Dhamma*-drum, sounding the drum of the Deathless, expounding the Four Truths.
76. ‘The millions upon millions of people accompanying the king will all, every one of them, become monks with the formula, “Come, monk.”
77. ‘Then gods and men will go to the Leader of the World and will ask the Conqueror a question about the excellent state of Arahantship.
78. ‘The Conqueror will explain (it) to them, and through the attainment of the excellent state of Arahantship by 80,000 *koṭi*-s (of people) there will be the Third Penetration (of the Truth).
79. ‘The first assembly will be of 100,000 *koṭi*-s of excellent people, whose corruptions are destroyed, without taint and calmed in mind.
80. ‘After the Blessed One has proclaimed the Pavāraṇā ceremony at the end of the Rains Retreat, that Conqueror will celebrate it with 90,000 *koṭi*-s (of people).
81. ‘The sage, in seclusion on the gold and silver slope of Mount Gandhamādana in the Himālayas,
82. ‘will enjoy the sport of meditation with 80,000 *koṭi*-s of excellent people, whose corruptions are destroyed, without taint and calmed in mind.
83. ‘One hundred thousand people who have attained the Six Super-knowledges and have great magical powers will constantly surround Metteyya, the Lord of the World.
84. ‘Skilled in the Discriminations, adept with words and (their) explanations, of great learning and expert in the *Dhamma*, distinguished and adding lustre to the Community,

85. 'well-trained, humble (but) resolute, they will surround the Conqueror. That Nāga [i.e., Metteyya] will be at the head of these monks, themselves excellent Nāgas; having crossed over and arrived at peace, he will be with those who have crossed over and are peaceful;
86. 'when the great sage has celebrated the Pavāraṇā ceremony with the community of his disciples, Metteyya, the best of (all) two-footed beings, full of pity and compassion,
87. 'will rescue many beings and bring them, along with gods, to nirvana. The Conqueror will live a wandering life, in villages, towns, and royal cities,
88. 'beating the drum of the *Dhamma*, sounding the conch-shell of the *Dhamma*, proclaiming the sacrifice of the *Dhamma*, raising the flag of the *Dhamma*.
89. 'Roaring a lion's roar and turning the supreme Wheel, he will make men and women drink the supremely tasteful drink of Truth.
90. 'For the benefit of all beings able to be led to Enlightenment, the Conqueror will live a wandering life enlightening people, both rich and poor.
91. 'The Seeing One will establish one person in the Going for Refuge; another in the Five Moral Rules, another in the Ten Skilful Actions;
92. 'to one person he will give the practice of asceticism and the four supreme Fruits [i.e., the four stages of the Path], to another (he will give) analytical insight into the unequalled *Dhamma*;
93. 'to one person the Seeing One will give the eight excellent Attainments, to another he will offer the Three Knowledges and the Six Super-knowledges.
94. 'This is the way the Conqueror will teach people; then the Dispensation of Conqueror Metteyya will be extensive.

95. ‘When that sage sees people capable of Enlightenment, he will travel 100,000 leagues in a moment to enlighten them.
96. ‘His mother then will be called Brahmavatī, and his father, who will be King Saṅkha’s (Brahmin) priest, will be called Subrahmā.
97. ‘Asoka and Brahmadeva will be his two Chief Disciples. Sīha will act as his attendant,
98. ‘Padumā and Sumanā will be his two Chief Female Disciples, Sumana and Saṅgha his two chief (male) personal attendants,
99. ‘Yasavatī and Saṅghā his two chief female personal attendants. The Enlightenment tree of that Blessed One will be the Nāga tree.
100. ‘Its trunk will be 2,000 feet (thick), and it will have 2,000 branches whose ends will sway gently (in the wind); it will look splendid, like a peacock’s tail-fan.
101. ‘The tips (of its branches) will be continuously in bloom, with a divinely fragrant scent; (each of) its blossoms, the size of wheels, will have (enough) pollen to fill a *nāḷi*-measure.
102. ‘Its scent will waft for 10 leagues in every direction, with and against the wind; it will scatter its flowers all around the Seat of Enlightenment.
103. ‘People from the countryside will smell its supreme scent and come together (to visit it), exclaiming in delight at its scent:
104. ‘“Fortunate is the result of merit for the excellent outstanding Buddha, because of whose glory (this) unimaginable (*acinteyya*, ‘unthinkable’) (scent) wafts forth.”
105. ‘That Conqueror will be 88 feet tall; the teacher’s chest will be 25 feet in diameter.
106. ‘The sage’s wide, curved eyes will not blink, by day or night, and he will be able to see with his eyes of flesh (any) small and large (object)

107. ‘for 12 leagues unobstructed on every side. His radiance will pour out as far as 25 (leagues).
108. ‘That Conqueror will be bright like a streak of lightning or a flaming torch, he will shine like the sun, just like a string of jewels.
109. ‘The Major and Minor Marks will seem like continuous rays, countless hundreds of thousands of multicoloured rays cascading (down).
110. ‘Every time he lifts his foot (in walking), a blooming lotus will grow (to receive it), whose (larger, outside) leaves will be uniform(ly) 30 feet and whose smaller (inside) leaves 25,
111. ‘its filaments 20 feet and pericarps 16. The lotus flowers will be full of fine red pollen.
112. ‘Gods from the Sphere of Desire will construct columns (of honour), then Nāga kings and Garuḍa birds will decorate them.
113. ‘(There will be) eight (such) columns of gold, eight made of silver, eight made of jewels, and eight made of coral.
114. ‘Many flags, several hundred, will hang there playing (in the breeze), adorned with various precious things and decorated with garlands (like) flags.
115. ‘(There will be) awnings decorated with strings of pearls and (other) jewels, resembling the moon, surrounded by networks of little bells and garlands of jewels.
116. ‘Scattered around will be various kinds of flowers, fragrant and sweet-smelling, different kinds of (aromatic) powders, divine and human,
117. ‘and various dyed cloths, beautiful with the five colours. With faith in the Buddha, they (i.e., the gods, Nāgas, and Garuḍas) will sport all around (him).
118. ‘Expensive jewelled gateways will be (set up) there, 1,000 (feet) high, good to look at, delightful, unobstructed, and firmly set;

119. ‘they will appear glorious, shining on every side. The Buddha, at the head of the Community of Monks, will be in the middle of them,

120. ‘like Brahmā or Indra in a *vimāna* in the middle of the members of their assemblies. They [i.e., the monks] will move about when the Buddha moves about, (and) remain motionless when he does;

121. ‘when the Teacher lies down or sits, along with his assembly, they will always and everywhere adopt (whichever is appropriate of) the four positions.

122. ‘There will be these and other (forms of) worship (*pūjā*), both divine and human, and various miracles all the time,

123. ‘in order to worship Metteyya, thanks to the glory of his infinite merit. Many people, from various castes, will see the miracles and go for refuge to the Teacher, along with their wives and children,

124. ‘(whereas) those who will listen to the Sage’s words and lead the celibate life will cross over the round of rebirth, (which is) subject to death and so difficult to cross.

125. ‘Many householders then will purify their *Dhamma*-eye, by means of the Ten Meritorious Deeds and the three types of good action [= of body, speech, and mind];

126. ‘many will purify (themselves) through (knowledge of) the texts and experience (of what they teach), piously following the *Dhamma*, and will be destined for heaven.

127. ‘It is not possible to describe completely their glory, saying, “It is just this much”: in this rebirth, a fortunate time, (one of) perpetual, constant happiness,

128. ‘with great glory, happiness, length of life, good complexion and strength, these human beings will (enjoy) god-like good fortune.

129. ‘After experiencing the happiness (brought by the fulfilment) of desire for as long as they wish, afterwards, at the end of their lives, these happy people will enter [heaven].
130. ‘Eighty thousand years will be the length of life then; for as long as he lives, (the Buddha) will cause many people to cross over [into nirvana];
131. ‘he will completely enlighten those beings whose minds are ripe (for it), and explain what is the Path and what is not to the remainder, who cannot see the Truth(s).
132. ‘The future Conqueror will carefully set up for beings the torch [or: crucible] of the *Dhamma*, the *Dhamma*-ship, the *Dhamma*-mirror and the (*Dhamma*-)medicine,
133. ‘along with the excellent Community of Disciples, who will have done what is to be done; the Conqueror will blaze like a mass of fire, and then go out.
134. ‘When the Fully Enlightened One is wholly extinguished (*parinibbute*), his Dispensation will endure for 101,000 years, and after that the disappearance will be hard for the world (to endure).
135. ‘Thus is the existence of conditioned things impermanent, unstable, temporary, transitory, (subject to) breaking up, decaying, empty.
136. ‘Conditioned things are like a hollow fist, empty, a tale told by an idiot [*bāla-lapana*, the babbling of fools]; no-one can control them, not even someone with magical powers.
137. ‘One should understand this as it really is and turn away from everything constructed. A Thoroughbred among men [i.e., a Buddha] is hard to find, he is not born everywhere;
138. ‘therefore, in order to see Metteyya Buddha here, do good energetically, steadfastly, agitatedly.

139. ‘All those who have acted rightly, living diligently, (whether) monks, nuns, male or female lay followers,
140. ‘doing great honour to the Buddha [or: Buddhas, *buddhasakkāra*] and worshipping him [them] greatly – they will (all) see [Metteyya’s] auspicious assembly at that time, along with the gods.
141. ‘Lead the religious [celibate] life, give gifts properly, keep the Uposatha day (vows), and cultivate loving kindness assiduously.
142. ‘Concentrate on being diligent in meritorious deeds at all times; by doing good here (and now), you will make an end of suffering.’

CONCLUSION

Modes of thought, modes of tradition

The last proposition in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, as first translated – 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' – is not without a certain pomposity, and so Ernest Gellner's somewhat uncharitable observation that the original sentence in German[1] can be sung to the tune of Good King Wenceslas is not inappropriate, albeit philosophically irrelevant.[2] More directly pertinent is an observation made by a contemporary of the early Wittgenstein, the mathematician and philosopher Frank Ramsey: 'What you can't say you can't say, and you can't whistle it either.'[3] What you can't say about nirvana you can't say, and you can't picture it by means of imagery either. In both the *Tractatus* and Buddhism, the ineffable is brought into being as an aspect of the effable. Inexpressible, timeless nirvana is a moment in the Buddhist textualization of time, the explicit or implicit closure-marker in its discourse of felicity. It is the motionless and ungraspable horizon, the limit-condition that makes of the Pali imaginaire a coherent whole. From within Buddhist ideology, one would need to add the proviso that nirvana exists beyond any historically specific imaginaire – the 'Dispensation' (*sāsana*) of any Buddha – which points towards it; although Buddhist doctrine is as much a direction arrow as a description of its destination, it certainly asserts that a destination *exists*. Nirvana is the object of Path-consciousness, a reality which can be attained by the Path, both

during life as Enlightenment (*bodhi*) and as final (*pari*) *nibbāna* at 'death', in one sense of that word.

But an external interpreter cannot, and for the purposes of interpretation need not, make this assumption. From such a perspective one needs only to discern how nirvana exists in the dynamics of Buddhist ideology, as that which structures and circumscribes the felicitous imaginaire as good to think, good to imagine, and good to narrate. The preceding chapters have shown that Pali texts do indeed speak of nirvana, up to a point, but also that the process of speaking about it leads up to silence, a silence-in-discourse that creates meaning as such. External analysis of the meaning of nirvana should not, I have argued, proceed vicariously, by speaking on the Buddha's behalf, filling in the silences (in the spirit of Ramsey, one might say, 'whistling to keep one's spirits up'). Etic understanding should preserve and respect the emic silence, while being able itself to continue speaking.

Nirvana offers, in systematic thought, the satisfactions of conceptual clarity and circumspection; in imagery those of elegance and embodied aporia; in narrative that of a mute 'sense of an ending' (to use Kermode's phrase), the 'expectation of nothing' (Hernnstein Smith – but it is a nothing that beckons). It has semantic value in concepts and imagery, and syntactic value in its role as the concluding period (full stop) in an eternal, beginningless and endless story. Since the sense of an ending is produced not merely in the abstract, in the ethereality of thought, but also practically, in the dramaturgical-ritual performances of Buddhists (notably the public recitation of texts), nirvana plays its role of closure on the level of pragmatics also. In the sociological vocabulary of manifest and latent functions, the analysis proposed here sees the semantics of nirvana, including silence-in-discourse, as manifest, its syntax and pragmatics, the sense of an ending, as latent.

One kind of scholarly understanding proceeds by making distinctions and clarifying differences; another by making connections

and illuminating similarities. I have been concerned to distinguish between systematic and narrative thought; Buddhist systematic thought presents a static arrangement of ideas, which are connected by logical, not temporal relations; its narratives are by necessity temporally structured. But I have also been concerned to stress their affinity, by arguing that imagery is the bridge, the mediating link between them. The two most common images of nirvana are the quenching of fire and the city. The imagery of fire is built into the vocabulary of the systematic thought in which the concept of nirvana exists; but it also has a temporal dimension, embodied in the verbs or verbal notions within the image: it is of fire *going out* or *quenched*. This temporal dimension is, in microcosm, the same as that of the larger-scale stories and histories in which narrative thought textualizes both time and timeless nirvana. So not only is the image intrinsic to the vocabulary of Buddhism (attachment-fuel, nirvana-quenching); it also contains – in a nutshell, or, to use a South Asian metaphor, in seed form – the narrative movement from suffering to resolution and closure in which nirvana's syntactic value is to be found. The City of Nirvana can be a static object of textual vision; but in the notion of the city as the destination-point of a journey, the terminus of the Path, which is again intrinsic to Buddhist systematic thought, there is also a microcosmic version of the entire Buddhist master-narrative. The Path to salvation is thus a journey through time from the city of the transient body to the city of timeless and deathless nirvana: the city without fear, as one of the earliest texts to use the image calls it. The images set the logic of the concept in motion: once there is motion, there is temporal extension, and once there is temporal extension there is narrative.

Systematic and narrative thought are modes of thought both for individuals and for traditions, forms of collective memory carried by civilizational institutions, in the case of the Pali imaginaire the

Buddhist Monastic Order. In concluding this book it will be useful, I hope, to repeat here the quotation from Thomas Mann used in the Conclusion to *Selfless Persons*. In *Joseph and His Brothers*, Mann wrote: 'True it is that man for the most part thinks in set phrases and fixed formulas; not such as he searches out for himself but as he remembers the traditional.'[4] These phrases and formulas are at least as much images as concepts: indeed, in cultural-civilizational traditions that include usually a majority of people for whom conceptual articulation is irrelevant and/or impossible, I have wanted to argue that images are the primary vehicle for remembering the traditional.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Caroline Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200 1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); and *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001).
2. See, *inter alia*, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948); and *The Sociology of Religion* (London: Methuen, 1963).
3. Jacques LeGoff, *The Medieval Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
4. 'Les notions religieuses, parce qu'elle sont crues, sont; elles existent objectivement, comme faits sociaux.' Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, 'Essai sur la nature et fonction du sacrifice', *Année Sociologique* (1898), pp. 29 138, quotation from p. 137.
5. James Egge, *Religious Giving and the Invention of Karma in Theravada Buddhism* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002).
6. For references to More's text and other translations see Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 112 and n. 125.

CHAPTER 1: SYSTEMATIC AND NARRATIVE THOUGHT

1. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
2. There are some encouraging signs of late: e.g., Reiko Ohnuma, *Head, Eyes, Flesh, and Blood: Giving Away the Body in Indian Buddhist Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and Andy

Rotman, *Thus Have I Seen: Visualizing Faith in Early Indian Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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CONCLUSION: MODES OF THOUGHT, MODES OF TRADITION

1. 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.'
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4. 'Es ist einmal so, dass der Mensch ganz vorwiegend in Schablonen und Formeln fertigen Gespräches denkt, also nicht, wie er sichs aussucht sondern wie es gebräuchlich ist nach der Erinnerung.'

Index